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2020 IN REVIEW

Bryan Washington chronicles a year of ordering takeout as the pandemic raged and beloved eateries closed.

NEW’S DESK

Paige Williams on Dan Barkhuff, a former Navy SEAL who is organizing his fellow-veterans to stop Trumpism.

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ON BECOMING A HERETIC

Larissa MacFarquhar’s article is a sensitive examination of the complexities of the child-custody cases that play out in civil courts when ultra-Orthodox Jewish parents make the wrenching decision to leave their community, and it adds an important dimension to the growing body of films, memoirs, and scholarship on the subject of those who abandon religion (“Solomon’s Dilemma,” December 7th). But in one description MacFarquhar’s casual tone could give a wrong impression. Voicing one source’s account of friends who have experienced a crisis of faith but haven’t left Hasidism, MacFarquhar writes that they “violated Shabbos all the time, watching sports, and just lied to their families about it.” In my book about religious Jews who lead double lives, “Hidden Heretics,” I find that people who have lost their faith but have decided to stay don’t “just” lie to their spouses and children. The emotional and moral reasoning behind their lies is complex, and it is based, above all, on a desire to avoid causing hurt to their loved ones. Some are afraid of the outside world, and others, especially women with few resources, are afraid of losing their children in the kinds of divorce scenarios that MacFarquhar describes. Indeed, many hidden heretics have told me that, despite their doubts about the truth of the Torah, they believed that staying in their community was the most ethical thing to do. Ironically, by choosing to stay, these people expose their children to their changing understanding of choice, individuality, tolerance, and critical thinking—thereby changing ultra-Orthodoxy itself.

Ayala Fader
Professor of Anthropology
Fordham University
New York City

Belonging to a Hasidic community offers a lifestyle of unparalleled social cohesion, but, as MacFarquhar shows, the community’s tight embrace all too often strangles those who don’t fit in. However, when individuals choose to stay and demand acceptance, Orthodox communities slowly change over time. As the executive director of Eshel, a nonprofit that creates community for L.G.B.T.Q. Orthodox Jews, I have seen the beginnings of evolution. My organization runs a retreat that was mentioned in the article; its existence is proof that there are queer Orthodox Jews who would like to find ways to stay in their communities. The work we do with Orthodox parents of L.G.B.T.Q. people and with Orthodox rabbis shows that these communities can become more accepting of a diverse membership.

Miryam Kabakov
Northampton, Mass.

I left the Hasidic world at the age of forty-five, and I have seven children. Hasidic kids are born into a system that withholds the education they need to function in the secular world. The status quo is upheld by politicians who turn a blind eye to yeshivas that do not adhere to state educational standards, even though the schools are ostensibly accredited and supported by public funds. Many Hasidic adults can barely read or write in English. What’s important to remember is that Hasidim are not in a quaint world apart from ours; they are Americans. Young adults are leaving ultra-Orthodox communities without the skills they need to survive. They face homelessness, depression, addiction, and suicide. MacFarquhar’s article depicts the lives of these apostates and their communities in a lyrical way, but avoids hard numbers and the sordid political collusion. At the end, the piece becomes a love story, as if in love there is resolution. I am a lesbian. I left my community in order to survive.

Leah Lax
Houston, Texas
In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here’s a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.

When the **Rink at Rockefeller Center** (above) opened, on Christmas Day in 1936, it was meant to be a temporary attraction. But the “skating pond,” as it was then known, has long since become a winter fixture of New York City. Holden Caulfield went on a date there in “The Catcher in the Rye,” and Truman Capote took to the ice for a *Life* magazine photo op. The rink is open to the public, for fifty-minute skating sessions, until Jan. 17; masks and advance tickets (via rockefellercenter.com) are required.
ART

“100 Drawings from Now”

This invitational show, at the Drawing Center, in SoHo, speaks to our lockdown epoch with startling poignancy. All but one of the works were created since the pandemic’s onset. Few are thematic. There are scant visual references to the spiky virus, though there are some good jokes on homebound malaise. Among the better-known artists, Raymond Pettibon pictures himself binging on episodes of “The Twilight Zone” and Katherine Bernhardt reports a homeopathic regimen of cigarettes and Xanax. Stylistic commonalities are scarce, aside from a frequent tilt toward wonky figuration. The show confirms a deltalike trend—or anti-trend—of eclectic eccentricities without any discernible mainstream. What unites Rashid Johnson’s grease-stick abstraction, conjuring a state of alarm in a pigment that has invented and dubbed Anxious Red; Cecily Brown’s pencilled carnage of game animals after a seventeenth-century still-life by Frans Snyders; and a meticulous, strikingly sombre self-portrait by R. Crumb? Isolation. Intended or not in individual cases, the melancholy gestalt is strong, as is its silver-lining irony of satisfying all artists’ ruling wish: to be alone in the studio. Alone with themselves. Alone with drawing. I found myself experiencing the works less as calculated images than as prayers.—Peter Schjeldahl (drawingcenter.org)

Sally Saul

This veteran ceramist’s small, brightly glazed animals, figures, and flowers (all made during the pandemic) become something like an indoor sculpture garden at the Rachel Uffner gallery, where they’re placed on pedestals of varying heights. Saul, who lives in the Hudson Valley, titillates us “by being a little Williamsburg,” playing on an undercurrent of anxiety lurking in the bucolic. Working in a forthright style, informed by folk traditions and the Bay Area art scene of the nineteen-seventies, Saul is attuned to the natural world and depicts birds—white-throated sparrows, a red-winged blackbird—with particular charm. Some of the pieces evoke turmoil, both inner and outer. In “Transformed,” a woman whose features recall emojis appears on the brink of a breakdown; in “Troubled Waters,” a ring of white waves encroaches on a figure in an inner tube (or a black hole). Such sculptures offset the show’s more contemplative moments and remind us—like the title of a bust of a be-spectacled woman in a blue mask—that we’re still in the midst of “Hard Times.”—Johanna Fateman (racheluffnergallery.com)

TARWUK

The Croatian artists Bruno Pogačnik Tremow and Ivana Vukšić, who collaborate as TARWUK, make a mesmerizing, if occasionally head-scratching, début at the Martos gallery. (The duo now live in New York.) Weathered-looking figurative sculptures, made from materials as varied as polyurethane foam and actual teeth (human and coyote), combine sci-fi aesthetics and the corporeal concerns of such predecessors as Alina Szapocznikow and Paul Thek. Abstract paintings, which are based on cosmographic geometries and have surfaces that suggest cratered terrain and mist, seem obliquely related to the spectral sculptures, as if connected by the same bleak, ancient narrative. An accompanying essay, by the curator and critic Bob Nickas, sheds light on TARWUK’s haunting, fragmented world, citing the Croatian War of Indepen-dence, in the nineteen-nineties, as a formative trauma for the artists and noting the pop and art-historical references in their dense visual lexicon—which is cryptic but well worth decoding.—J.F. (martosgallery.com)

PODCASTS

Anthem

The British podcast producer Hana Walker-Brown launched her new show, “Anthems,” in March, to mark International Women’s Day. The goal of the program, which provides an outlet for underrepresented voices to speak on issues that move them, is to offer a purposeful corrective to the predominantly white, predominantly male podcasting sphere. In each episode, the speaker (guests have included the writer Bernardine Evaristo, the body activist Jada Sezer, the editor Tobi Oredein, and the journalist Poorna Bell) takes on a single word, such as “failure,” “strength,” or “empire,” and then delivers a manifesto exploring her own definition of the term. What results is a heady combination of TED talk, literary reading, rousing impromptu lecture delivered in a smoky bar, and raw confession.—Rachel Syme

Lolita Podcast

Very few books have vexed and divided more people than Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 masterpiece, “Lolita,” the tale of a pedophile named Humbert Humbert, who is hideously obsessed with a twelve-year-old girl. Jamie Loftus, a writer and the host of the podcast “My Year

AT THE GALLERIES

The American artist Benny Andrews, who died in 2006, at the age of seventy-five, painted with deep feeling for working people. He arrived at the extraordinary composite technique he called “rough collage”—incorporating fragments of clothing and other elements into his figurative images—while completing a portrait of the janitors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which he attended on the G.I. Bill. One of the tenderest and most dynamic pictures in the wonderful exhibition “Benny Andrews: Portraits, a Real Person Before the Eyes,” at the Michael Rosenfeld gallery (through Jan. 9), presents the artist’s father, a Georgia sharecropper, at hard-earned rest in an easy chair. Andrews also painted his fellow-artists—his wife, Nene Humphrey; Alice Neel; Norman Lewis; Howardena Pindell—because he “wanted to make them appear as much a part of everyday existence as taxi drivers or lawyers.” In the show’s tour de force, “Portrait of the Portrait Painter” (above), from 1987, Andrews turned his loving and intelligent eye on himself and his labor.—Andrea K. Scott
The episode that got me hooked on “Ologies,” a weekly talk show hosted by the boisterous, flame-haired comedian Alie Ward, was “Scorpiology.” Ward interviews an intrepid entomologist named Lauren Esposito, who has spent her career studying scorpions. As a person with an extreme aversion to creepy-crawlies, I tuned in with trepidation, but an hour later I was walking in loops around a block so I could keep listening and felt a newfound tenderness for and excitement about the wild world of venomous stingers. This was in no small part thanks to Ward’s gregarious interview style, which is at once casual, curious, and concrete. The show—each episode of which features a long chat with a scientist, a professor, or some other eccentric expert—is about digging into not only quirky subject matter but the humans who choose to devote their lives to studying fringe fields. You’ll meet a nephologist (clouds), a nassologist (tadpoles), a cucurbitologist (pumpkins), and many others. Ward is generous and inquisitive, warm and never judgmental; when it comes to pulling touching stories out of scientists, she has it down to an art.—Rachel Syme

in Mensa,” first read “Lolita” when she was in middle school and has been haunted by it ever since. She decided to unpack her complicated feelings about the material in the new “Lolita Podcast” (produced by iHeartRadio), which, despite its simplistic name, is a remarkably researched and complex dive into the rabbit hole of Nabokov’s work and the cultural twisting of his reputation. Loftus believes that Nabokov intended the story to damn its protagonist rather than exalt him, but she is more interested in exploring the long fallout of the novel than in taking sides. She probes many aspects of the “Lolita” industrial complex, from the film adaptations to the fashion staple and a reliable crowd-pleaser since its debut, twenty years ago. On Dec. 23, Ballet Hispánico streams a 2019 performance of the piece on its YouTube channel and Facebook page. The screening also includes a conversation with the company’s artistic director, Eduardo Vilaro; the work’s Cuban-born choreographer, Pedro Ruiz, a former company member; current dancers; and alumni.—Brian Seibert (ballethispanico.org)

The Nutcracker at Wethersfield
The ritual of attending one of many versions of “The Nutcracker” during the holidays looks different this year. With few exceptions, companies have reverted to some form of online presentation. Troy Schumacher, a soloist at New York City Ballet with a burgeoning choreographic career, is trying something different: an experimental version at Wethersfield, a stately home with formal gardens, in Amenia, New York. The story is told through a series of danced scenes, each in a different room of the house—and on the terrace, in the gardens, and, finally, in a large tent enclosing the Land of the Sweets. A small number of lucky families will get to see it live—following extremely strict health protocols—but there will also be a free stream of the ballet, available Dec. 23–26.—Marina Harss (nutcrackeratwethersfield.com)

THE THEATRE

A Christmas Carol
Why limit yourself to one role in a show? In 2016, Jonathon Mays won a Tony Award for “I Am My Own Wife,” in which he channelled a transgender woman and the people in her life. A decade later, he barreled through madcap costume changes as he portrayed every member of the D’Ysquith family in the zany musical “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love & Murder.” Now Mays is taking on all the characters in Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol,” in an adaptation that he wrote with his wife, Susan Lyons, and the inventive director Michael Arden (“Once on This Island”). The show, which debuted two years ago at the Geffen Playhouse, in Los Angeles, has been restaged for a streaming version filmed at the United Palace, in New York City—a rococo geyser of red velvet and gold detailing that is the perfect setting for a Victorian tale.—Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Jan. 3; achristmascarollive.com)

This Is Who I Am
For the Palestinian playwright Amir Nizam Zuabi, cooking does not just anchor individuals and families; it also serves as a storytelling device. In his one-woman play “Oh My Sweet Land,” from 2013, a small audience gathered to watch an actor prepare a dish of kibbe in real time. Now comes “This Is Who I Am,” a live-streamed production directed by Edward Dickin and presented by the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, in which a father (Ramsey Faragallah) and his son (Yousof Sultanii) cook the savory pies known as feer. In a sign of the times, they are chatting over Zoom: the older man is in Ramallah, the younger in New York (the actors are in their respective kitchens), and their relationship is physically and emotionally distant. The virtual format works well in this context, but Zuabi’s ripe dialogue can’t avoid the clichés that so often burden reconciliation narratives.—E.V. (Through Jan. 3; woollymammoth.net/event/who-i-am.)

MUSIC

The Hamrahlíð Choir: “Come and Be Joyful”
CLASSICAL There may be no advocates for adolescent vocalizing more compelling than Iceland’s Hamrahlíð Choir, whose alumni include the operatic bass Kristinn Sigmundsson, the pianist Vikingur Ólafsson, and, according to Björk, “every single Icelandic musician you have ever heard of.” Having sung in the choir when she was sixteen, Björk engaged the youthful group and its venerable conductor, Poggerþur Ingólfsdóttir, for her album “Utopia” (2017) and for “Cornucopia,” an elab—R.S.
orate, mesmerizing 2019 stage production that she mounted at the Shed. “Come and Be Joyful” comprises the choir’s contributions to that show, including versions of Björk’s “Sonnets” and “Cosmogony,” plus other folk songs balancing rusticity and sophistication, luminously voiced.—Steve Smith

Paul McCartney: “McCartney III”

As the Beatles were disintegrating, the band’s bass player turned his attention to his solo début, a shambolic set performed almost entirely alone and, despite its fundamental Paul-ness, simply titled “McCartney.” With its home-baked charm nodding ahead to indie rock, it’s the rare classic that sounds like the bonus-track outtakes from another. A decade later, McCartney released a sequel that shared the first album’s independent mind-set but shifted to eccentric synthesizer pop. Now the global pandemic has led to a third entry, most of it recorded solo again. Like its predecessors, “McCartney III” draws strength from its nonchalance and seems to scramble into its brightest spots, especially the linked acoustic-guitar pieces that bookend the album. The record radiates warmth in a manifestly bleak period, with a chubby old voice bespeaking comfort, kindness, and familiarity.—Jay Ritenberg

Ben Monder, Tony Malaby, Tom Rainey

Jazz Things can get hairy when the guitarist Ben Monder, the saxophonist Tony Malaby, and the drummer Tom Rainey—all respected longtime members of New York’s jazz avant-garde—assemble as a trio. They join forces for a live-streamed show from Bar Bayeux. Resistance is thrown to the wind as sonic textures are bandied about with gleeful immoderation. Yet their music managed to soar amid the roughhousing. The road map may not always be clear, but players this familiar with one another’s improvisational ploys always manage to find a way home.—Steve Futterman (Dec. 23 at 7:30; barbayeux.com.)

“Planet Mu 25”

Electronic Mike Paradinas, a producer best known for his work under the alias µ-ziq, founded the label Planet Mu in 1995, and in the quarter century since it has become the rare imprint that has made deep marks on multiple electronic dance styles—armchair I.D.M. in the late nineties, dubstep in the twenty-tens. All of those are featured on the anniversary collection “Planet Mu 25,” but, instead of a retrospective, it’s a survey of the label’s present roster—a highly diverse collection with tracks that fit into the Planet Mu legacy by moving sharply forward.—Michaelangelo Matos

Streaming Holiday Concerts

Classical Not even a pandemic can suppress Handel’s “Messiah,” a work of prenatural jubilance and comfort—such is its ineradicable power. Several ensembles are making their streams of the oratorio available through the New Year, including the Handel and Haydn Society (with masked and distanced singers), the Oratorio Society of New York (with an outdoor concert filmed in the fall), and the choral and orchestral forces of Trinity Church Wall Street (with a live concert from 2019). For non-“Messiah” programming, the charismatic bass-baritone Bryan Terfel sings a set of carols for the “Met Stars Live in Concert” series (through Dec. 30). The New York Philharmonic’s brass section, donning Santa hats (and at least one Santa beard), polishes holiday favorites to a near-impossible gleam in an outdoor amphitheatre, trimmed with garlands, at Montclair State University (through Jan. 4).—Oussama Zahr (Check Web sites for links.)

M. Ward: “Think of Spring”

Experimental “Migration Stories,” an album that M. Ward released in April, was a pictorial meditation on movement across space and time. For Ward’s second project of 2020, “Think of Spring,” he pauses for a moment and sits inside the music of the jazz legend Billie Holiday. The songs are loose, understated reworkings of those from Holiday’s penultimate album, “Lady in Satin, and although they can’t live up to the deep soul and emotional weight of her inimitable performances, they aren’t meant to: Ward, who remembers once mistaking Holiday’s tender delivery for a guitar, simulates her singing with his instrument and, in the process, offers a testament to the alchemy of her voice and its pull across music forms.—Juliysa Lopez

One Night in Miami

This vigorous and insightful drama—the first feature directed by the actress Regina King—imaginatively fills in the details of a mighty event that took place behind closed doors: the 1964 meeting, in a motel room, of Malcolm X (played by Kingsley Ben-Adir), Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom, Jr.), Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge), and the boxer then known as Cassius Clay (Eli Goree), who had just beaten Sonny Liston to win the heavyweight championship. The gathering of friends was rooted in controversy—Clay’s conversion to Islam, which he hadn’t yet announced publicly. The script, by Kemp Powers, dramatizes the four friends’ involvement in the civil-rights movement and, in particular, Black artists’ and athletes’ following her folk-rock revelation, “folklore,” a sublime album of fables and flashbacks written and released earlier in the pandemic, Taylor Swift found herself swept up in its many stories. She kept writing them, and now “evermore,” which she describes as a sister album to “folklore,” exhaustively plumbs those pathways. Again created in collaboration with the National’s Aaron Dessner, the album is an even rootier offshoot of her chamber-pop songcraft, expanding her cast of characters to include the small-town girl turned starlet Dorothea, Swift’s late grandmother Marjorie, and a (very real) Haim sister, Este, who gets caught up in a (very made-up) whodunnit. “Evermore” lacks its predecessor’s hushed sense of enchantment, but the sorcery is still present in Swift’s authorship—a master songwriter enlivened by the form.—Sheldon Pearce
“I’m enjoying my life, easing back into work and college,” Sagal said, as the twenty-four-year-old urban-engineering student described her routine. For a long time, life was significantly more challenging for Sagal, who was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, or RRMS, when she was in high school. Her primary-care physician attributed her fatigue and migraines to hormones or developmental issues, and teachers implied that she was lazy. “I blamed myself,” Sagal said. “To compensate, I signed up for an early-morning gym class, ate healthily, and pushed myself to do well in school.”

Despite her efforts, Sagal’s symptoms began to escalate: tingling and numbness in her arms and legs, loss of sense of taste, and increased fatigue. One day during her senior year, Sagal was struck by intense dizziness and vomiting. “My dad took me to a neurologist, Dr. Bhupendra O. Khatri, a founder and medical director for the Center for Neurological Disorders, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which treats 3,500 patients per year, prescribed a daily pill. She became well enough to attend college on a limited basis and to work part-time.

But then, after five years, Sagal’s fatigue and headaches returned and she had to put her college studies and work on pause. A new MRI confirmed some progression of the disease. Dr. Khatri told her about MAVENCLAD® (cladribine) tablets, which had recently come on the market. “I had been following the development of MAVENCLAD for years,” Dr. Khatri said. “I felt that Sagal was an excellent candidate for this short-course oral therapy.”

He made sure that Sagal and her family were aware of potential side effects. He explained that there is a cancer risk associated with the medication, so she needed to follow screening guidelines prior to treatment. Dr. Khatri also noted that there’s a risk of birth defects for pregnant women, and that men and women of childbearing age should use effective birth control during treatment and for at least six months after the last dose of each treatment course. The most common side effects for MAVENCLAD include upper respiratory infection, headache, and low white blood cell counts.

Dr. Khatri was reassured by the fact that “the pharmaceutical company, EMD Serono, Inc., had performed analysis by collecting safety data from two thousand MS patients over 15 years.” During a ninety-six-week clinical trial for MAVENCLAD, inclusive of 433 patients on MAVENCLAD and 437 on placebo, patients who took the medication experienced a 58% reduction in relapse rates per year, compared to those who took a placebo (MAVENCLAD 0.14 vs placebo 0.33).

In people with MS, white blood cells called T and B cells, or lymphocytes, do not communicate properly and become overactive, leading them to attack the central nervous system and cause damage and inflammation. “MAVENCLAD is believed to work by reducing the number of T and B cells in the body, so there are fewer of them to attack the nerves,” Dr. Khatri said. Once treatment is finished for the year, the immune system will begin to produce new T and B cells. It may take several months or more for the recovery of T and B cells, but some patients may not go back to pre-treatment levels.

MAVENCLAD is the only short-course oral therapy that requires a maximum of ten treatment days a year over two years. “For me, the best part is the dosing schedule,” Sagal said. Patients take one to two tablets for up to five days per month for two consecutive months during the first year, and then repeat that course at the beginning of the second year.

“Since I’m not taking MAVENCLAD for ten months out of the year, I don’t have to take it everywhere with me,” she added.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the two yearly treatment courses, as well as between treatment courses and for at least another two years, during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects. It is not known if it is safe and effective for people to restart MAVENCLAD after the full four-year period.

Sagal completed her second course of treatment in August of 2020. Today, she and Dr. Khatri are pleased with how she’s doing. “Over all the years I’ve known Sagal, she seems more like herself now,” Dr. Khatri said. Sagal has returned to college, though classes are virtual due to the coronavirus, and works part-time. “MS is not holding me back,” she said. Reflecting on her experience, she said, “I would offer this advice to people who are newly diagnosed with MS: There are people who care. Stay hopeful!”

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing-remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough. MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

MAVENCLAD may cause serious side effects. Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. You should follow healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer. Because of the risk of fetal harm, do not take MAVENCLAD if you are pregnant or of childbearing potential and not using effective birth control.
MAVENCLAD is the first and only short-course oral therapy with no more than 10 treatment days a year over 2 years.†

Talk to your healthcare provider to find out if MAVENCLAD is right for you, and visit mavenclad.com for more information.

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*Depending on your weight.

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Please see Important Information, including serious side effects, on the following pages.
Read this information carefully before using MAVENCLAD and each time you get a refill, as there may be new information. This information does not take the place of talking with your healthcare provider (HCP).

What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?

MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:

- **Risk of cancer (malignancies).** Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk of developing cancer if you receive MAVENCLAD. You should follow your healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer.

- MAVENCLAD may cause birth defects if used during pregnancy. Females must not be pregnant when they start treatment with MAVENCLAD or become pregnant during MAVENCLAD dosing and within 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and call your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant during treatment with MAVENCLAD.

  - For females who are able to become pregnant:
    - Your healthcare provider should order a pregnancy test for you before you begin your first and second yearly treatment course of MAVENCLAD to make sure that you are not pregnant. Your healthcare provider will decide when to do the test.
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.
      - Talk to your healthcare provider if you use oral contraceptives (the "pill").
      - You should use a second method of birth control on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 4 weeks after your last dose of each yearly treatment course.

  - For males with female partners who are able to become pregnant:
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) during the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.

What is MAVENCLAD?

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough. MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in children under 18 years of age.

**Do not** take MAVENCLAD if you:

- have cancer (malignancy).
- are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are a woman of childbearing age or a man able to father a child and you are not using birth control. See “What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?”
- are human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positive.
- have active infections, including tuberculosis (TB), hepatitis B or C.
- are allergic to cladribine.
- are breastfeeding. See “Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:”

Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:

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- have heart failure.
- have liver or kidney problems.
- have taken, take, or plan to take medicines that affect your immune system or your blood cells, or other treatments for MS. Certain medicines can increase your risk of getting an infection.
- have had a recent vaccination or are scheduled to receive any vaccinations. You should not receive live or live-attenuated vaccines within the 4 to 6 weeks preceding your treatment with MAVENCLAD. You should not receive these types of vaccines during your treatment with MAVENCLAD and until your healthcare provider tells you that your immune system is no longer weakened.
- have or have had cancer.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if MAVENCLAD passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD, and for 10 days after the last dose. See “Do not take MAVENCLAD if you:”

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

How should I take MAVENCLAD?

- Limit contact with your skin. Avoid touching your nose, eyes and other parts of the body. If you get MAVENCLAD on your skin or on any surface, wash it right away with water.
- Take MAVENCLAD at least 3 hours apart from other medicines taken by mouth during the 4- to 5-day MAVENCLAD treatment week.
If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember on the same day. If the whole day passes before you remember, take your missed dose the next day. **Do not take 2 doses at the same time.** Instead, you will extend the number of days in that treatment week.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the 2 yearly treatment courses, and for at least another 2 years during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in people who restart MAVENCLAD treatment more than 2 years after completing 2 yearly treatment courses.

**What are the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD?**

MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:

- See “What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?”

- **Low blood cell counts.** Low blood cell counts have happened and can increase your risk of infections during your treatment with MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider will do blood tests before you start treatment with MAVENCLAD, during your treatment with MAVENCLAD, and afterward, as needed.

- **Serious infections such as:**
  - TB, hepatitis B or C, and shingles (herpes zoster). Fatal cases of TB and hepatitis have happened with cladribine during clinical studies. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any symptoms of the following infection related problems or if any of the symptoms get worse, including:
    - fever
    - aching painful muscles
    - headache
    - feeling of being generally unwell
    - loss of appetite
    - burning, tingling, numbness or itchiness of the skin in the affected area
    - skin blotches, blistered rash and severe pain
  - Progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML). PML is a rare brain infection that usually leads to death or severe disability. Although PML has not been seen in MS patients taking MAVENCLAD, it may happen in people with weakened immune systems. Symptoms of PML get worse over days to weeks. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any new or worsening neurologic signs or symptoms of PML, that have lasted several days, including:
    - weakness on 1 side of your body
    - loss of coordination in your arms and legs
    - decreased strength
    - problems with balance
    - changes in your vision
    - changes in your thinking or memory
    - confusion
    - changes in your personality

- **Liver problems.** MAVENCLAD may cause liver problems. Your healthcare provider should do blood tests to check your liver before you start taking MAVENCLAD. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the following symptoms of liver problems:
  - nausea
  - vomiting
  - stomach pain
  - tiredness
  - loss of appetite
  - your skin or the whites of your eyes turn yellow
  - dark urine

- **Allergic reactions (hypersensitivities).** MAVENCLAD can cause serious allergic reactions. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms of allergic reactions. Symptoms of an allergic reaction may include: skin rash, swelling or itching of the face, lips, tongue or throat, or trouble breathing.

- **Heart failure.** MAVENCLAD may cause heart failure, which means your heart may not pump as well as it should. Call your healthcare provider or go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms such as shortness of breath, a fast or irregular heart beat, or unusual swelling in your body. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects.

The most common side effects of MAVENCLAD include:

- Upper respiratory infection
- Headache
- Low white blood cell counts

These are not all the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

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struggles to express themselves freely in white-run media, the overlapping quests for economic and political power, and the government persecution endured by Black activists. The foursome’s mounting conflicts lay bare crucial historical fault lines; the fervent performances, which King passionately and probingly spotlights, match the momentousness of the high-stakes dialectical wrangling.—R.B. (In limited theatrical release.)

Promising Young Woman
The thirtysomething Cassie (Carey Mulligan), a medical-school dropout, works as a barista and goes out every night to bars and clubs, where she feigns drunkenness and teaches the men who pick her up a lesson about consent. The backstory eventually emerges: in medical school, a female student—Cassie’s best friend—was raped while drunk and reported the crime, but the school took no action, and, soon thereafter, she died by suicide. Ever since, Cassie has been improving the world, one man at a time, and awaiting her chance for revenge; meanwhile, at the café, she encounters Ryan (Bo Burnham), a doctor and former classmate, but struggles to confide in him about the past. As Cassie’s schemes become more complex and violent, the tale grows diabolically clever yet cartoonishly exaggerated—her machinations, implying the skills of both a secret agent and a crime boss, just happen. The film’s writer and director, Emerald Fennell, suggests that extreme measures are needed to achieve even minimal justice; Cassie’s history and ongoing confrontations with predators inspire righteous outrage and aching empathy, but her passionately solitary devotion remains abstract and impersonal.—R.B. (In limited theatrical release.)

Soul
Pixar’s latest creation, bouncy and earnest, is (like “Inside Out,” from 2015) an experiment in psychology—and, as the title suggests, it’s a metaphysical one. Joe (voiced by Jamie Foxx) is a middle-school music teacher who has long aspired to a career as a jazz pianist. He gets a gig with a famous saxophonist (Angela Bassett), but, in his excitement, he has a fatal accident, and his soul ascends to a grandiose yet rigidly bureaucratic place in the sky where character traits and personal identities are assigned. Joe’s soul wants to get home for the gig, and, aided by a rebellious soul (Tina Fey), he escapes; back in the city through some posthumous trickery, he learns valuable lessons about his wonderful life. The movie’s depiction of an afterlife that’s run like a corporation is as chilling as its message about not quitting one’s day job. Far from teaching children to follow their dreams, the movie—directed by Pete Docter and co-directed by Kemp Powers—advocates leaving the dreaming to the pros.—R.B. (Streaming on Disney+.)

This Must Be the Place
This film by Paolo Sorrentino—his first feature to be set outside Italy—stars Sean Penn as a laconic, middle-aged rock god of the gothic variety. Attended by his wife (Frances McDormand), he rattles around in a large Dublin house, still clothed in black, with hair of undiminished wildness. A phone call summons him to America, for the obsequies of his father; he then heads farther afield, in search of the elderly Nazi who persecuted the father at Auschwitz. That solemn turn of the plot feels both unearned and deeply unwise, and yet, once our hero is on the road, Sorrentino is granted ample opportunity to inspect this newfound land with his usual bemusement. The result is startling but slight, and at no point are we encouraged to think of Penn’s character, in all its carefully controlled fragility, as less than endearing. With Judd Hirsch, and featuring a brief performance from David Byrne, whose song of the same name supplies the movie’s title. Released in 2012.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/5/12.) (Streaming on Amazon Prime.)

WHAT TO STREAM

Though the screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz is in the headlines as the protagonist of “Mank,” it’s worth noting the more comprehensive artistry of his younger brother, Joseph (a supporting character in “Mank”), who won Oscars for writing and directing the acerbic 1949 melodrama “A Letter to Three Wives.” (It’s streaming on Amazon and other services.) Set in a comfortable New York suburb, the film is centered on three couples, close friends whose marital troubles (dramatized in flashbacks) are brought to the fore by a letter from a glamorous divorcée who claims to have run off with one of the three husbands. The action highlights conflicts of class and culture; the most passionate and contentious reminiscence, involving a young salesclerk (Linda Darnell) and her boss, a middle-aged department-store owner (Paul Douglas), pivots on a New Year’s Eve celebration in which love and lust, pride and rage are compressed into a single mercurial encounter. A year later, Mankiewicz won the same pair of Oscars for “All About Eve”; “A Letter to Three Wives” is the deeper film.—Richard Brody
The other day, hours after I’d hung up the phone with the chef Mark Strausman, he accidentally called me back. “Oops!” he said. “That’s what happens when your fingers are covered in olive oil.” Strausman was at his new restaurant, Mark’s Off Madison (41 Madison Avenue), which debuted last month near Madison Square Park. His hands have been covered in olive oil for most of his sixty-odd years.

In the early nineties, the Queens native opened a series of Italian restaurants, including Campagna and the original Coco Pazzo. In 1996, he created Freds at Barneys, turning it into an institution with satellites in Beverly Hills and Chicago. Last year, Barneys went bankrupt, and Strausman was let go. Never mind: he was already hard at work on Mark’s Off Madison, which he abbreviates as M.O.M., to emphasize the Jewish-mother theme. Devotees of Freds will be delighted to find many of its signature dishes resurrected here, including the chopped chicken salad (with avocado, string beans, and pears), Estelle’s chicken soup, and bolognese lasagna. But hand-painted letters on a glass wall in the dining room advertise what is, in my opinion, M.O.M.’s biggest draw. “Not Your Grandfather’s Bagels,” they read, with “Not” crossed out. In the August of his career, Strausman is chasing his youth, attempting to re-create the bagels (plus bialys) that he remembers eating as a kid.

He started this quest at Freds “because I was having a midlife crisis and wanting to get rid of my motorcycle,” he told me. “Bread-making became a passion because there’s an insanity about it.” At M.O.M., he has a proper wood-fired bagel oven, which helps attain a distinctly crunchy exterior—coated in toppings only lightly, and on just one side, so as not to compete with the flavor of the malt-infused dough. Straussie’s bagels, as he calls them (available only on weekends), are both denser and smaller than most of their latter-day equivalents. The increased puffiness of bagels is not, Strausman explained, a result of the broader supersize phenomenon but, rather, of technological advancement; to make bagels automatically, you need a wetter dough or else the machine will jam. More water means more fuel for yeast, which means more rising and expanding. Strausman is preserving the dying art of hand-rolling.

So, too, is a young woman named Elyssa Heller, across the river, at her indefinitely running pop-up, Edith’s (60 Greenpoint Avenue, Brooklyn, in the pizzeria Paulie Gee’s), which offers what you might call your great-great-grandmother’s bagels—hand-rolled but also twisted, as in Old World Poland. They’re as personal to Heller as Strausman’s are to him: boiled in water flavored with honey instead of malt, they refer also to Montreal bagels (Heller went to college in Canada), and are made with flour milled from heirloom grains grown in Illinois, her home state.

Edith was Heller’s great-aunt, who once ran a deli in Brooklyn, and whose archive of recipes, many scrawled on paper plates or napkins, inspired some of the pop-up’s dishes, including the smoked-trout salad, served on a bagel with house-cultured cream cheese, sliced radish, and trout roe. Otherwise, Heller aims to explore the Jewish diaspora. She hesitated before offering schnecken, traditional German-Jewish sweet buns whose name (German for “snails”) doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. “I was a little nervous that people wouldn’t get it and they couldn’t pronounce it,” Heller told me the other day. But, she said, “we want to tell stories with our food.”

Edith’s schnecken encase sour cherries and Turkish pistachios, or honey seasoned with the paprika-forward Middle Eastern spice mix baharat. But perhaps the best represented of the planet’s scattered populations of Jews is the one right here in New York, in the form of a bagel sandwich called the BEC&L. That’s “B” for bacon (with apologies to the rebbes), paired with egg, Cheddar cheese, and a gloriously crispy, thick golden latke. (Mark’s Off Madison bagel platters $22–$38. Edith’s bagel sandwiches $10.50–$12.50.)

—Hannah Goldfield
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“Hey, Dr. Biden, how are you—how’re you doing?” the driver of a Teamsters Local 633 pickup truck called out cheerfully to Jill Biden, Ed.D., one day this fall when she was campaigning for her husband in New Hampshire. The other occupants of the truck offered similar greetings. In recent days, the soon-to-be First Lady’s use of the title “Dr.” has inspired an unaccountable spate of anger on the right. In a Wall Street Journal opinion piece, Joseph Epstein wrote that it “sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic.” Tucker Carlson, on Fox, called her “poor, illiterate Jill Biden.” Yet the Teamsters, like any number of people whom Biden has encountered in the political world and in academia over the years, had no problem using the honorific. (The community-college students she teaches call her Dr. B.) The only novel aspect of the encounter in New Hampshire came when she gestured to a man standing next to her and asked, “You met Doug, right? Everybody met Doug?”

They had met Doug Emhoff, the husband of Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris, and many more Americans will get to know him in the weeks leading up to her swearing in, alongside Joe Biden’s, on January 20th. When Biden announced his selection of Harris as his running mate, he said that Emhoff would be a “barrier-breaker” as the first Second Gentleman of the United States. He will also be the first Jewish person to be a Second (or First) Spouse, and he and Harris will be the first interracial couple in their position. And yet, if Emhoff is an unconventional figure, it is mostly because his wife is one on a more historic scale: the first woman and the first person of color elected to the Vice-Presidency. The reactions to Jill Biden and Doug Emhoff raise different, if related, questions. In her case, it’s how her simple wish to be known by a title she earned could excite such fury. For Emhoff, it’s what it means to say that a successful, white corporate lawyer still has new barriers to break.

One explanation for the scorn directed at Jill Biden is that our political culture is so unhinged that anybody close to a President-elect gets pelted with whatever material is available, whether it makes sense or not. Michelle Obama, after all, was attacked for wanting to plant a vegetable garden. During the Obama Administration, she and Jill teamed up to create Joining Forces, an initiative that offers support to military families—as bipartisan a project as one could imagine. The incoming Administration disabled its Web site within hours of Trump’s Inauguration; Jill Biden plans to revive it. (Emhoff has said that he is considering working on food insecurity or access to the justice system.)

But women’s experience of first having their credentials ignored and then being mocked if they assert them is all too familiar, in almost every arena. That is doubly true for women of color; Harris is a U.S. senator and a former attorney general of California, but Donald Trump has portrayed her as pushy, dislikable, and alien, drawing on the most tedious racist and sexist tropes. “Kamala. Kamala,” he said at a rally in October, mangling each syllable. “You know, if you don’t pronounce her name exactly right, she gets very angry at you.”

Nor is it incidental that both Epstein and Carlson suggested that the topic of Biden’s dissertation, which has what Epstein called an “unpromising title”—it’s “Student Retention at the Community College: Meeting Students’ Needs”—was piddling. If anything, that topic is more urgent than ever. Last month, a study by the National Student Clearinghouse found that community-college enrollment had fallen, in the course of the pandemic, by almost ten per cent; among underrepresented minorities, that number is close to thirty per cent. Community colleges provide a route to the middle class for people who are low income, the first in their family to attend college, immigrants, single parents,
Steve Bannon wasn't angry, but he was very disappointed. “You know, I'm pretty low-key,” he said one recent evening. “And I think my instinctive reaction was ‘I really wish they had not done this to our town.’ Because I love our town, and we didn’t deserve it.” He was sipping hot chocolate outside a busy café in Great Barrington. “And I must tell you, with my name,” he added, “it seemed like a double whammy.”

Bannon, who frequently receives “very nasty” e-mails meant for the right-wing political operative, is a pharmacist and political operative, is a pharmacist and credentials can be something quite normal. He can always ask Dr. Jill Biden for advice.

— Amy Davidson Sorkin
press releases,” Bannon said. But, for this, “we put out two international press releases.” The first, published in October, made the point that “the town itself had no role in, or forewarning of, the declaration bearing the town’s name.” A second was addressed to the A.I.E.R.: “Your co-opting of our town’s name . . . is exploitative and unwelcome.” Mark Pruhenski, the town manager, wrote a letter to the Guardian, lamenting that the A.I.E.R. “has caused immeasurable distress to many in our community and confused many others about our town’s safety.”

The last time the town made the national news was in 2012, when Bill O’Reilly, then still at Fox News, called it “the town that hates Christmas,” claiming that it had banned festive lights on Main Street. O’Reilly had first picked on the town in 2007, when the select board imposed an ordinance mandating that Christmas lights be turned off at 10 p.m., to save energy. Great Barrington weathered those unwelcome moments in the limelight. Residents are hoping that this one, too, shall pass. Ed Abrahams, another select-board member, gave an interview to the Berkshire Edge, an online newspaper, in which he pointed out that “the Paris Accords were signed in Paris and I don’t think the people of Paris formally approved that document.” He added that Ralph Lauren had once marketed a line of bedding named for Great Barrington. “Though it’s possible,” the Edge noted, “those pillow shams and dust ruffles are named after the village of Great Barrington in Gloucestershire, England, from which the southern Berkshire County town derives its name.”

—Leo Mirani

YEAR’S BEST
TOUGH COOKIE

Today’s Pandemic Person of the Year started out as a cross-eyed boy in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, with a bullyable surname and actorly dreams. He moved to New York in 1998 to enroll in the Experimental Theatre Wing at N.Y.U. One night, he and some fellow-students were recruited to work as runners at the reopening of the night club Limelight. The naked—but-forbody-paint dance troupe being late, the students, attired in black turtlenecks and slacks, were asked to improvise some moves. Our honoree, dutifully Dietering, looked down from the stage and saw Donald Trump: “He was staring directly at me, with a look on his face that said, ‘What is this garbage?’”

This was his second encounter with the future President. When he was nine or so, his parents took him, as they often did, to Atlantic City. “We’re in the Taj Mahal, and Trump shows up, with Marla Maples. And so I—and I don’t remember doing this, my parents tell this story—I stood on my chair and yelled out, ‘Hey, asshole! Fuck you!’”

In New York, our awardee worked around town as a pianist, eventually under the stage name Ladyfingers; for a time, he had a regular gig at a now defunct gay bar called Pegasus, across from Bloomingdale’s. They hired him because he looked good, but he could play anything. “I have a very spongy brain,” he said the other day. “If I’ve heard it, I can play it. Until recently, my fans didn’t know I had these skills.”

These fans, who include Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, and Barack Obama, will now guess, correctly, that this Pandemic Person of the Year is Adam Weiner, the songwriter, singer, piano player, and chief showman behind the band—and occasional solo act—Low Cut Connie. His sixth album, “Private Lives,” came out this fall. One track, “Look What They Did,” laments the mess that Trump and others left behind in Atlantic City. The album has had some chart success and has made (and even topped) some year-end best lists. And yet, for whatever reason, Weiner, who is forty, has never had a record deal. (Several albums ago, he started his own label.)

What has enabled him to show off his spongy brain, as well as his chops and his bountiful good vibes—Little Richard meets Mr. Rogers, maybe—is his twice-weekly interactive live stream, called “Tough Cookies,” which he began in March. Deprived of the thrill and
the income of performing live, he started broadcasting from the guest room of his row house, in South Philadelphia. “We had no plan,” he said. He’d driven up to Manhattan to accept the honor, in a midtown pocket park. He had on a black hoodie, a jean jacket, faded black jeans, and a silver mask, which seemed almost to reach the front edge of his Jerry Lee Lewis curls. “We had no plan,” he said. He’d just turned the phones on and hung out. And there was no audience or laughter or applause. I didn’t know how many people were watching or if they’d like it. All I knew was that at the end of the hour I was lying on the floor in my underwear, covered in sweat.” The next stream attracted a hundred and fifty thousand views. Realizing that this was going to become a regular thing, he christened it “Tough Cookies.” “I named it after the people who watch it,” he said. Among them were nurses in COVID wards who pinned their phones, in ziplocks, to the wall, and viewers in more than forty countries, including Lebanon and Afghanistan.

“Tough Cookies” is a homespun variety show: music, comedy, interviews, spilling, shvitzing, stripping. Dressed in a white tank top, or his grandfather’s maroon Pierre Cardin bathrobe, surrounded by oddments and schwag, Weiner hams it up on an upright piano, accompanied by a guitar player, Will Donnelly, who keeps the beat with a stomp box under one foot and a tambourine on the other. “We shoot it on our phones,” Weiner said. “I don’t even use a mike. There’s no light—ing, no makeup, just chest hair hanging out. It ain’t shit.” He interviews guests: Darlene Love, Dion, Nils Loofgren, Nick Hornby. Mathew Knowles, Beyoncé’s dad, came on to talk about the checkered role, in the industry, of skin complexion.

The death of George Floyd, and the tumult that followed, brought some extra seriousness to the proceedings, but the aim remained uplift. After almost seventy episodes, Weiner has played some six hundred covers, sometimes in medley—say, “War Pigs” into “Macho Man”—and a hundred originals. A disquisition on the origins of Cardi B’s “WAP” one night took him back to 1929, to “Wet It,” by the female impersonator Frankie (Half Pint) Jaxon. “I feel like I left the music business and I’m in the entertainment business,” Weiner said. “I feel like I have my own TV show.” He was sort of amazed that he hadn’t heard from HBO.

The owner of Mimi’s, a piano bar in midtown, let him in out of the cold, and Weiner noodled on the keys, under a plaque that read “What is your favorite song?” He found this one hard to answer. Prince? “Stardust”? “Maybe Aretha: ‘Niki Hoeky.’”


—Nick Paumgarten

THE PICTURES

W

hen the filmmaker Eugene Ashe was growing up, in Harlem, he watched Sidney Lumet shooting “Ser-pico” in his neighborhood. “It was the scene where Al Pacino got shot in the face, and they took him into the emergency room,” he said the other day, walking past the old Knickerbocker Hospital, now a senior-citizen residence. He pointed to the rooftop where he had perched, as the movie people created a fake downpour: “I remember being seven years old and sitting there and watching them make it rain.” Across Convent Avenue was his elementary school, where Spike Lee shot exteriors for “Jungle Fever.”

Harlem and the movies are all tangled up for Ashe, especially now that he has written and directed “Sylvie’s Love,” a romantic drama set in the late fifties and early sixties, which will be released on Amazon this week. Tessa Thompson plays the title character, a young woman who works at her father’s record store, where she meets a handsome jazz saxophonist named Robert (Nnamdi Asomugha). Ashe, who is soft-spoken, with stubble and catlike eyes, said that he wanted to emulate the big-screen romances of the era—“Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” “That Touch of Mink”—but with Black characters. “When we talk about the sixties and Black folks, it’s often framed through our adversity,” he said. “What I saw growing up was very different.”

Ashe was born in 1965, and the characters are loosely inspired by his parents, Vinnie and Dolores. Near St. Nicholas Park, where Sidney Poitier once filmed a scene for “Edge of the City,” he pointed out the building where he lived until he was eight, across a courtyard from his grandmother’s place. “They used to run a clothesline, and my grandmother would wash my brother’s and my clothes,” he recalled. The neighborhood, in the pre-crack years, had a swanky middle class. In “Sylvie’s Love,” the colors are saturated, the clothes elegant. (Chanel lent five dresses.) “I wanted to see ‘Ms. Thompson’s gowns by Chanel’ in the credits,” Ashe said.

Because of Thompson’s schedule, he couldn’t shoot on location, so he re-created Harlem on Hollywood back lots, taking visual cues from old family photos. He pulled one up on his phone: his father in front of a blue tail-finned Chevy, with Ashe’s older brother, Tony, in a kid-size suit from Barneys. “This is what Black folks looked like,” Ashe said. His mother’s cousin Juanita Hardy was Poitier’s first wife, and Ashe remembers visiting them in Pleasantville, in Westchester County. “There’d be all kinds of people there, like Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee,” he said. Sylvie, after breaking up with Robert, moves to the suburbs with her husband, who disapproves of her burgeoning televi-

Adam Weiner
esion career. Ashe’s mother also worked, at a telephone company. “I don’t think my mother was going to be happy sitting around being a housewife,” he said. His parents split up when he was thirteen: like the movie, a not quite happy love story. “You look at these old pictures and you wonder. It looks so idyllic, right?”

Walking through City College, he squinted at a photo of his mother on the campus, posing with his brother’s baby carriage near a bust of Lincoln. Ashe stopped a passerby and asked, “Do you have any idea where the Lincoln head is?”

“It’s inside the building now,” the woman said, nodding toward Shepard Hall. “His nose is completely polished, because the students rub it for good luck.”

The campus was shut down, so Ashe ambled on to Hamilton Terrace, a brownstone-lined street. “This is what I was going for, when Robert walks Sylvie home,” he said. After studying at Parsons School of Design, Ashe began working at an interior-design firm, but found it “boring.” In the early nineties, his life took an unexpected turn toward R.& B. stardom, when his cousin, tapped by the C+C Music Factory producer David Cole, started a Boyz II Men copycat group, called the Funky Poets, and got Ashe to join. They had a track on the “Free Willy” soundtrack and a spot on “The Arsenio Hall Show” (“which thrilled my dad”), but Ashe didn’t like the attention. “When you are the soap that you’re selling, it’s a lot to deal with,” he said. The group’s record deal lapsed, but he transitioned to writing music for TV shows such as “Oz.” En route to becoming a filmmaker, he opened two restaurants on the West Side, Réunion Surf Bar and Playa Betty’s, which he’s been struggling to keep afloat during the pandemic.

Rounding back onto Convent, Ashe looked wistful. His brother had died the day before, from cancer, years after he was a first responder at Ground Zero. He got to see “Sylvie’s Love” in his last months. “He’s a big history buff, so he really dug it,” Ashe said. “But he lives on in these photographs and the memory of this time. There were four of us: my mom, my dad, me, and my brother. And I’m the only one left.”

—Michael Schulman
There once was a chandelier at the Metropolitan Opera who thought that the audience was applauding just for him. The chandelier fell in love with one of the janitors, a man named Rocco, and wanted only Rocco to change his bulbs. Rocco returned the chandelier’s love, but when his boss found out about the affair he was fired. Late one night, Rocco broke into the Met and stole the chandelier. They settled into Rocco’s apartment, blissful in their union, the chandelier’s light blazing through the window onto the street below.

This peculiar romance is not from a magical-realist novel or a quarantine fever dream. It’s an idea for a digital short that Julio Torres pitched again and again at "Saturday Night Live," where he worked as a writer from 2016 to 2019. The piece never got made, because it presented practical problems. The show would need to take over the Met for an evening. Also, a lot of "Saturday Night Live" sketches are tailored to the celebrity guest hosts, and, as Torres said recently, “one of the pivotal flaws in ‘The Chandelier’ is that there was no juicy human role.” Many of his rejected ideas dwelled in the surreal, closer to Ovid or Gabriel García Márquez than to “Dick in a Box.” In one, a man goes to Heaven and discovers that the angels act like birds, building nests and eating in terrifying, beaky thrusts. Another was an infomercial for a miniature staircase that people can put next to their ears at night, so that their dreams can come out and dance, to prevent headaches. Speaking about his unmade pieces, Torres told me, “I have mourned every loss.”

But the ones that made it to air were strange and fanciful enough to earn him a cult following—rare for a writer who doesn’t appear on the show. In “Papyrus,” Ryan Gosling plays a man haunted by the fact that the movie “Avatar” used the Papyrus font for its logo. “Wells for Boys,” a mock Fisher-Price commercial, features a toy well, meant for “sensitive boys” to sit beside longingly and wish upon. (“Some boys live unexamined lives,” a voice-over says, “but this one’s heart is full of questions.”) Torres, who grew up gay in El Salvador, wrote “Wells for Boys” with Jeremy Beiler, who helped shape his abstract concept into the fake-ad format. “We couldn’t quite pinpoint what was so funny about it,” Beiler told me. “But that to me was a signal that it was absolutely worth pursuing.” Even Torres’s political humor had a whiff of fairy tale. The first sketch he got on the air was “Melania Moments,” in 2017, which recast the new First Lady as a sort of captive princess, gazing out at Fifth Avenue from Trump Tower and wondering if a Sixth Avenue exists. (He lost interest in Melania’s inner life after she wore the “I REALLY DON’T CARE DO U?” jacket on her way to an immigrant-detention center.)

Torres, who is thirty-three, is more attuned to the visual world than most comedians. His imagination is a comic synesthesia, assigning anthropomorphic traits to colors, objects, and design flaws. Another digital short was inspired by a visit to a bland, newly renovated apartment on the Upper East Side. When he used the bathroom, he was appalled by the ornate green glass sink. “My world was rocked,” he said. “I took, like, thirty pictures of it.” At “S.N.L.,” he wrote an internal monologue for the sink (“Am I too much? Oh, my God. I’m simply too much”) and had the crew return to the apartment to film it. That week’s host, Emily Blunt, did the trembly voice-over. “She can play damaged very well,” Torres said. Torres has an “ethereal, gossamer quality,” “S.N.L.”’s Bowen Yang observed.
Last year, Torres left “S.N.L.” to focus on “Los Espookys,” the outré HBO sitcom that he created with the comedian Ana Fabrega and Fred Armisen, a former “S.N.L.” cast member. Torres plays the heir to a chocolate fortune, who goes into business with his friends producing custom horror and gore effects. (In the pilot, a priest hires the gang to stage an exorcism so that he can show up a younger rival priest.) The series, which is bilingual, premiered in 2019; the second season is in pandemic limbo. Armisen told me that, before he started working with Torres, he would call his friends at “S.N.L.” to ask who was behind certain sketches. “Most of the time, it turned out to be Julio,” he said.

Torres has a boyish face, a small, fit torso that he flaunts on Instagram (his handle is @spaceprincejulio), and the self-possession of an oracle. The “Saturday Night Live” cast member Bowen Yang spoke of his “ethereal, gossamer quality.” Armisen compared Torres’s “outer space” aura to that of the Icelandic musician Björk. In Torres’s HBO special, “My Favorite Shapes,” which was released in 2019, Torres sits on a dreamlike pastel set, and, as small items come out on a conveyor belt, he narrates their inner thoughts. A pink rectangle with a chipped corner is “having a really bad day.” An oval is prone to gazing at its reflection, “wishing he were a circle.” The conceit sounds twee, but Torres’s delivery has the matter-of-factness of a child describing the secret lives of his toys. He appears in his space-prince guise: bleached hair, silver jacket, see-through vinyl shoes. “My favorite color is clear,” he tells the audience, as a replica of Cinderella’s glass slipper comes down the track. When he started doing standup comedy, he wore only black, but gradually he has expanded his palette to include white, silver, clear, and blue. His hair functions as a mood ring. When he got melanoma a few years ago, he dyed it from white back to its natural brown, because, he recalls thinking, “blond me can’t handle this.”

Standup comedy favors minimalism: a bare stage, a microphone, and outfits that range from casual to barely out of bed. Its optical elements are usually limited to wacky props (“Carrot Top”), rubber faces (Leslie Jones), or, when the budget allows, arena-rock effects (Kevin Hart). But Torres approaches comedy like an inspiration board. Describing an idea for a future special about fables, he told me, “The set is a garden, and there’s a pond. Maybe there are clouds painted, and then I walk about the garden and talk about the fables.” He had not written any of the fables. One of his few stylistic antecedents is Pee-wee Herman, the antic character played by Paul Reubens, who inhabited a candy-colored playhouse. Pee-wee’s hyperactivity matched his visual maximalism, though; Torres has a deadpan stillness at odds with his twink-from-space look. On the “Tonight Show,” he has appeared, unsmiling, to give Jimmy Fallon suggestions for Halloween costumes (“the lost city of Atlantis”) and Christmas gifts (“a music box that can only be locked from the inside, by the ballerina”).

I first met Torres in late 2019, in the pre-COVID world, at his apartment in Williamsburg. He had lived there only four months, but the living room looked art-directed: blue lighting that made it feel like the inside of a fishbowl, metallic statement lamps, a wavy sectional. Torres sat beneath a circular mirror, near a row of delicate-looking ceramic hooks made by a friend. “I love them, because, if you were to use them, they would break,” he said. “So, instead of me putting them through the pain of failing, they’re just arranged together. They’re like actors, I guess. Fragile little things.”

Torres wore blue socks, a black shirt, and a sky-print jacket with a clear breast pocket, which held a watch. He had worn the watch on his commute to the “Los Espookys” writers’ room that morning but had taken it off to work. (“I can’t think when I have stuff on my hands.”) The watch, like all three of his wall clocks, was broken. “It’s a symptom of a bigger problem, which is I never know where I’m supposed to be or what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. He led me into his small office, where the desk was strewn with spherical dice, an ostrich figurine, a squiggly metal brooch. (Squiggly shapes, he said, were “a constant for the time being.”) “And then you can never have enough of these,” he said, spilling out a cache of plastic diamonds left over from Halloween, when he dressed up as a gem miner.

On a sofa was a throw pillow made of clear plastic filled with shredded Mylar, designed by someone he had met through Instagram. I remarked that, if Torres were a pillow, he would be this one. “Yes,” he said. “Impractical. A pillow by definition, but not in execution. A pillow, because what else are you going to call it?”

“Los Espookys,” set in an unnamed Latin-American country, is shot in Santiago, Chile. The series originated with Armisen, who had been thinking about creating a show in Spanish. His mother is Venezuelan, and his family lived in Brazil for a time when he was growing up. “There was a real obsession with death,” Armisen recalled. “I remember soap operas had a sort of morbid element.” After visiting Mexico City several years ago, he got interested in the Latin goth scene and, drawing on a range of tonal influences, from “Twin Peaks” to “The Monkees,” came up with a show about a “Scooby-Doo”-type gang that stages horror scenes.

Armisen gave himself the part of a mustachioed valet and brought in Torres and Fabrega to write and star alongside him. He had imagined one member of the gang being able to sculpt prosthetics out of chocolate. Torres spun the character, Andrés, into a “pouty little prince,” and pushed the humor into the mystical. In the first season, Andrés has visions of a water demon (played by Torres’s former roommate, the nonbinary comedian Spike Einbinder), who promises to reveal the secret of Andrés’s origins if he agrees to watch “The King’s Speech.” Fabrega told me that, while the second season was being written, “Julio was, like, ‘I want to have the moon be Andrés’s friend that does him favors.’ And we were, like, ‘O.K.’”

Torres dyed his hair midnight blue for the role, “to trick the eye into thinking I’m acting.” (While shooting the first season, he left blue stains all over the furniture of his Airbnb.) The color complemented his air of wintry inaccessibility, but, when I met him one day in the dead of January, his hair was sunset orange. “For such a big chunk of my comedy career, I was very into the idea of ice and diamonds and silver,”
he explained. “And now I’m feeling a little warmer. I feel like lava.”

We were at Mood Fabrics, a store in the garment district. Torres visits several times a year, to pick out materials for his wardrobe. He then delivers the fabrics to a tailor in San Salvador, where his mother, Tita, an architect and designer, still lives and can oversee the fabrication process. “Then we experiment, with, like, a sixty-per-cent success rate,” Torres said, wandering the aisles. He was there to select materials for his summer attire, anticipating a months-long turnaround. He eyed some shimmering silk. “Normally I’d be, like, ‘This,’” he said. “But now I’m not feeling too shiny.”

On the second floor, he gravitated toward a roll of neon-orange neoprene. “Could be some fun shorts,” he said, and asked an employee to cut him a strip. We walked through the spandex aisle, where he took a swath of purple mesh. “I have tried to make swimwear,” he said. “Micromanaging the fit of a speedo long distance is very difficult.”

But difficulty seemed to be the point: why buy a pair of shorts when you can make your own across hemispheres? “It’s something that comes up in therapy a lot—not always having to pick the harder way,” Torres said. In a few days, he was leaving for Chile, which had erupted in civil unrest, to begin filming the second season of “Los Espookys.” The whole series felt like an act of ostentatious difficulty: a bilingual show with a convoluted premise, shot in a country in the throes of a revolution. “It’s a miracle that it was made,” he said.

“My Favorite Shapes” was also a Pan-American project. Torres enlisted his mother and his younger sister, Marta, who lives in San Salvador as well, to create the look of the show, down to his wardrobe. He refuses to use credit cards (“I just don’t like games”) and, for a time, shut down his bank account. “At that point, I had, like, forty dollars,” he said. He surveyed the brocade aisle. The store was closing soon, and he was getting impatient. “There’s something that we’re just not finding,” he said. “I’m vibing with flowers a lot, but I hate florals.”

Finally, he spied a brocade with a blue-and-green watercolor pattern. He pulled the bolt from the shelf and felt the cloth between his fingers. “A floral that’s not a floral!” he said. “It does exist.”

Torres’s unlikely rise was foretold shortly after his birth, when a fortune-teller informed his grandmother that one of her descendants would become a success in New York City. The grandmother claimed the prophecy for several of her grandchildren, but Tita was convinced that it was about her six-month-old son. She had visited New York while pregnant, not long after an earthquake devastated San Salvador. Tita loved science fiction and Brazilian telenovelas, which often feature fantastical story lines. Torres half-remembered one about a man in a dungeon whose lover is reincarnated as the moon.

Torres was born during the last years of the Salvadoran Civil War, and he has dim memories of hiding under the dining table with his mother as helicopters noisily hovered. But, by his account, his childhood in San Salvador was idyllic. The family lived in a stylish apartment above his mother’s clothing store. (His father, also named Julio, is a civil engineer.) Tita sewed his and his sister’s clothes; she told me that her children were “mis muñecas”—“my dolls.”

Torres had few friends, immersing himself in his toys. When his father brought home miniature cars, he created elaborate traffic jams, mimicking the cacophonous streets of San Salvador, and sold the drivers imaginary lottery tickets. “I was just in my own little world,” he said.

A large chunk of his time was spent on Barbies. Unhappy with Mattel’s premade Dream Houses, he enlisted his mother to make customized homes out of cardboard. “I wanted circular windows and for the doors to open a certain way, so she made them per my specifications, setting me on this lifelong journey of being, like, ‘If it doesn’t exist, I have to create it,’” he said. (At “Saturday Night Live,” he channelled his Barbie obsession into a recurring sketch in which interns at Mattel write captions for Barbie’s Instagram account.) His parents encouraged his nontraditional interests. “It gave him the power to be different against the world,” his sister said.

When Torres was eleven, his grandfather died, leaving crippling debts, which his father inherited. His mother’s store went out of business, and the family had to move to a farmhouse where Tita had been brought up, on the outskirts of the city. Torres was prone to allergies and developed a respiratory condition. He hated the outdoors. And he no longer had his mother’s seamstresses at his beck and call. “It was almost like that little kingdom came tumbling down,” he said. He thinks of “My Favorite Shapes” as a way of “claiming back my childhood, like: ‘I want to go back in that little room and just play, without worrying about other stuff.’”

As an adolescent, he became withdrawn and dressed plainly, as if in hibernation. “Truly the dark ages,” he recalled. “I wasn’t even an angsty teenager—I was a patient one.” In line with the fortune-teller’s prophecy, he vowed to move to New York someday. He and his sister won scholarships to attend a private high school in San Salvador, where their rich classmates were picked up by servants. “I got picked up by my dad, whose car was older than I am,” he said. “Oh, my God, the noise the car made, pulling up to this castle.”

He knew that he was gay, but considered his sexuality a “frivolity” that he would address only when he absolutely had to, like going to the dentist. “It felt like one of a myriad of things that made me an other,” he said. He was more preoccupied with his atheism. As a child, he had been told the truth about Santa Claus—a “politically difficult year to navigate,” since some kids were still be-
lievers—and expected a similar revelation about God to follow, but it never did. After high school, unable to afford tuition at an American college, he enrolled in a two-year advertising program in El Salvador, at a “scam of a nothing school” that he despised. He finished the program, and, while working at an ad agency, he gathered his relatives and gave a detailed presentation on why they should pay for him to go to school in New York. His second time applying to the New School, he got a significant scholarship, and in 2009 he moved to Manhattan, with enough money to live there for two years. “They wanted a translation of my transcripts, because they were in Spanish, so I translated them myself and I embellished a bunch of courses,” he said. “And then I sheepishly put it in front of the admissions officer, and she was, like, ‘Oh, my God, why didn’t you say you took all these courses when you applied?’ And she takes out her calculator and says, ‘You’re a junior, not a freshman.’ And I’m, like, ‘Ooh, I guess I am.’”

Torres majored in English literature but dabbled in playwriting. Spike Einbinder, whom he met in a class, acted in one of his short plays, as a woman who is obsessed with a gargoyle on the Chrysler Building. “There was construction that was obscuring her apartment’s view of it, and it made her go crazy,” Einbinder recalled. After graduating, Torres had a year to get a work visa in his area of study, but no company would sponsor him. By the summer of 2012, he was panicking and needed to focus. He wore only black and white and became a vegan. “There was something very monklike about it,” he said. “I was, like, I need to thrive within limits.”

Finally, he found a job as an art archivist for the estate of the late painter John Heliker. He worked in a windowless vault in Newark, cataloguing Heliker’s papers. “I glamorized the optics of that job,” he said. “Solitude has never really been a problem for me. I liked how weird and difficult it was.” He had a side gig at the Neue Galerie, on the Upper East Side. Working at the coat check one day, he recalled, “I overheard this elderly rich woman tell this other elderly rich woman, ‘Oh, remind me to send you that article on how good stand-

ing is for you.’ That was the moment where I realized that New Yorker cartoons were based on a reality.” He wrote in his notebook, “Standup comedy?” That night, he Googled “standup comedy open mics NYC” and found one in the East Village, where he told the coat-check story in his comedy début.

By then, he was living in an apartment in Bushwick with Einbinder and another friend. Einbinder, whose mother, Laraine Newman, was an original cast member on “Saturday Night Live,” encouraged Torres’s comedy career. They started making funny videos, including one in which Einbinder plays a mermaid intern navigating the microaggressions of office life. (Her co-workers assume she knows everyone in the ocean.) They performed live sketches at bars and comedy clubs. “In one, we were bitchy little angels texting on a cloud, just talking about how bored we were, and about a party and who’s going to be there from Heaven,” Einbinder recalled. “And then we started spreading cream cheese all over ourselves.”

Torres was a peculiar presence in the comedy scene, which is riddled with dudes in flannel shirts complaining about their girlfriends. He usually read non sequiturs from a notebook, with a flat affect. “He would always say ‘Hi’ before he started,” Einbinder said. “And then, at the end, he would always say, ‘So unless anyone has any questions . . .’” In 2015, his visa was about to expire. In order to apply to stay in the country as a comedian, he had to pay more than five thousand dollars in legal and filing fees. His new friends in the comedy world, including Chris Gethard, Jo Firestone, and Newman, made a YouTube video called “Legalize Julio,” and the money was raised in an hour. His new visa classified him as an “alien of extraordinary ability.”

Feeling liberated, he had begun dressing in silver and had dyed his hair white. Ana Fabrega, who had been working at a credit-risk-management firm when Torres coaxed her into trying standup comedy, recalled, “He made it a point to say, ‘I was wearing dark colors because I was absorbing, and now I want to reflect.’” His otherworldly new look matched his place in the comedy scene. “I realized that I was so much of an other in that world, as much as I had been throughout my childhood,” he told me. “I wanted to lean in on that: If I’m an alien, then I will be the alien.”

In February, “Los Espookys” returned to Santiago to begin production on Season 2. Because of the nationwide uprisings, producers had looked into shooting elsewhere, but Mexico’s film crews were overbooked, Colombia was having its own protests, and
LIFE DRAWING BY EDWARD STEED
other Latin-American countries lacked the infrastructure to host an HBO sitcom. By March, news of the coronavirus was picking up, but there were only a few cases in South America. One day, a cast member who had just come from the United States found out that he'd been in contact with someone who'd tested positive. Shooting was paused. Everyone worried—the actor's makeup artist was an older woman, and she had touched his face. The actor tested negative, but "that fear was enough for us to say, 'You know what? It's just not worth it,'" Torres told me. Production was halted, with a third of the season unfinished.

He flew home the day that Chile closed its borders to foreigners. In Brooklyn, he spent nearly three months in isolation in his apartment. He bought a new rug, a mirror in the shape of a human profile, and a lamp that looks like a "blob of lava." He had a chair reupholstered with more floral—but-not-floral fabric he'd got in the garment district. But his splashy summer wardrobe remained unmade. He cut his hair down to its natural dark shade. "It's almost like my shiny performance self is on hold," he told me. "He's asleep. My first self is back."

When the Black Lives Matter protests began, he went out to march in two masks and a pair of goggles. Several weeks later, he was still processing his place in his adopted country, and within the larger capitalist forces that shape the entertainment business. "I've seen so many corporations—HBO included—talk about how now it's time to 'elevate Black voices,' and that got me thinking about the Hollywood fairy tale representation equals change," he said. "For a while, I have felt like a pawn in this hollow representation game. Because what the hell does Disney's 'Coco' do for Mexican children? Bob Iger gets richer. That's the climax. And then I'm researching the C.E.O.s of these media conglomerates, and they're predictably the mushiest white of these media conglomerates, and they're thinking about the Hollywood fairy tale gay aesthetic to the show. When John Mulaney hosted, Yang and Torres wrote a sketch for him about a social-media intern at Nestlé who gets chastised for accidentally posting hookup messages ('Wreck me, daddy') on the corporate Instagram account. The sketch got cut after dress rehearsal, but, last fall, after Torres had left "S.N.L.," it was revived for Harry Styles. Before the broadcast, the network's lawyers asked them not to use Nestlé, an advertiser, so Yang and Torres had to brainstorm. "That was two to three hours of us just texting each other back and forth, putting photos of grilled-cheese sandwiches with these raunchy captions, doing experimental trial-and-error work," Yang said. They landed on Sara Lee, and the sketch went viral. "I feel like Julio getting hired and getting his stuff on was this huge quantum leap for the show," Yang told me. "He brought both his queerness and his hyper-specific point of view, and then he glued those two things together."

Torres is clear-eyed about his success. "I'm certainly not bringing in the big bucks for HBO," he told me. "It feels like 'Game of Thrones' is a rich student, and I'm the scholarship kid." Abstract as it seems, his comedy is attuned to the politics of the real world, including the Trump Administration's demonization of Latin-American immigrants. In "My Favorite Shapes," as he contemplates a crystal pyramid, he talks about how difficult it was to choose which shapes should appear in what order: "And, as I was just deciding all of that, I thought, Oh, I'm sorry, is this one of the many good jobs I'm stealing from hardworking Americans?"

One night in May, Torres hosted a Zoom comedy benefit to help undocumented workers during the lockdown, titled "My Sun in Aquarius." A few minutes after eight, he appeared on screen in a psychedelic sweater, under the blue light of his living room. "The lack of laughter is jarring," he said, as he greeted more than two thousand remote spectators. One by one, he summoned an all-star roster of guest performers. First up was the comedian Nick Kroll, who was lounging in front of a roaring fireplace. Torres gave lessons in "hand acting," instructing him to act out scenarios using only his hands, such as dropping a knife after-committing a murder: "But you didn't plan for the murder—it sort of just happened." Kroll tried it, using a pen. "One thing I found missing from your knife-drop was regret," Torres said, then tilted his own camera toward his hands and acted the scene with quivering fingers.

Next, he called up the actress Natasha Lyonne to discuss the personalities of colors, including gunmetal gray and rose gold. (Torres: "Rose gold just moved out of Stuyvesant Town or even Hoboken. Rose gold just got it together, and now they live in Cobble Hill." Lyonne: "It depends what era. Did rose gold leave Joan Rivers's house and move to Miami? I don't know.") Fred Armisen played a similar game with letters of the alphabet. "I have very strong feelings about Q," Torres proclaimed. "To me, Q is misplaced in the alphabet. Q should be all the way in the back with the avant-garde X-Y-Z." He imagined Q performing early in the evening at a rock club, between the more mainstream letters P and R. "Q is doing noise music, and people are, like, Whoa."

"That is so right on," Armisen said. When I spoke to Torres's mother, she described a recurring dream she's been having, in which she is told that her son is an alien. "Right before the pandemic, I had it again," she said. "I can't find him, and then these aliens come and tell me to go with them, and they take me to a ship. And they tell me, 'Don't worry about your son. Your son is fine. He's here with us.'"
HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS WITH YOUR TOXIC FAMILY

SO, I’VE SURVIVED CHRISTMAS WITH MY FAMILY WITHOUT LOSING IT ONCE. WHAT POINTERS WOULD I GIVE MYSELF FOR NEXT YEAR?

2. MAINTAIN A POKER FACE

3. AVOID POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

IT’S NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORY! IF TRUMP ISN’T A ROBOT, THEN HOW WAS HE ABLE TO TWEET TWO HUNDRED TIMES IN ONE DAY?

4. TRY TO IGNORE NEGATIVE COMMENTS

THAT’S YOUR SECOND PLATE, DEAR. REMEMBER, IT’S FOOD, NOT FEELINGS.

5. STICK TO YES—OR—NO ANSWERS

WHEN DO YOU PLAN ON GETTING A REAL JOB?

OR DO YOU PLAN TO DO THIS DEAD-END ART STUFF FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

AND DON’T WORRY WHEN PEOPLE ARE YELLING. WORRY WHEN THEY’RE NOT.
6. CATCH UP WITH YOUNGER RELATIVES

SO, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
WRITING A TWITTER THREAD ABOUT HOW CHRISTMAS KEEPS CAPITALISM ALIVE.
OH...

7. EXPRESS GRATITUDE

I THOUGHT, WHAT'S A GREAT GIFT FOR SOMEONE WHO NEEDS TO LIGHTEN UP A LITTLE?
THANKS, THIS IS HILARIOUS.

8. SUGGEST AN ACTIVITY

DID SOMEONE TAKE ONE OF MY CARDS?
WHO'S WINNING?
WAIT, WHEN DID WE START?

9. STAY OUT OF ARGUMENTS

YOUR TURKEY WAS DRY AND BLAND!
WELL, YOUR VEGETABLES WERE COLD AND SOGGY!

10. PLOT YOUR EXIT

O.K., HERE'S THE PLAN: YOU START HYPERVENTILATING, AND I'LL TAKE IT FROM THERE.

11. OR... JUST STAY HOME

I THINK THIS IS THE BEST CHRISTMAS I'VE EVER HAD.
EPHIPHANY

In an interview some years ago, I was asked when I realized that on occasion I could actually make people laugh. Remarkably, I knew. It was in Sunday school. I think I was in sixth grade. I was a shy little boy and, up to that point, insanely well behaved. The story that exemplifies that level of decorum—the only story of my grade-school years in Kansas City that my daughters have ever enjoyed hearing—goes like this: In about third grade, our teacher announced on a Monday morning that there would be an extra recess period on Friday for anyone who had gone the entire week without a check mark for any sort of misbehavior or disturbance. When Friday arrived, I was the only one in the class with no check marks, so my reward was to spend an extra period on the playground all by myself—lonely, bored, and insanely well behaved.

In that Sunday-school class of my epiphany, the teacher, a rather pedantic and self-important man, was droning on about a passage in Psalms—“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” Suddenly, I found myself standing up. In a loud voice, I said, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.” As I spoke, I extended my right hand from my body at a weird angle, dangling from a limp right arm. I finished the passage with my attempt to replicate the speech of someone whose tongue had cleaved to the roof of his mouth. The class exploded with laughter. The teacher simply exploded. I was ejected from the room.

Was I then transformed into the class clown—the kid who sneaks a whoopee cushion under the pad on the teacher’s chair and is regularly sent to the vice-principal’s office? No. For one thing, there were guardrails at home to prevent that. I’ve often mentioned that, as I interpreted my father’s aspirations for me, he wanted me to become the President of the United States and his fall-back position was that I not become a ward of the county. I’m certain that there were some callings in between that he would have considered acceptable, but none of them began with regular sessions in the vice-principal’s office.

I did, though, make some attempts at humor during my school days. For a high-school literary society, I wrote a few comic short stories, all of which, I devoutly hope, long ago disintegrated at the bottom of some landfill. In a speech to decide the presidency of the Southwest High School student council, I remember saying that more wastebaskets in the halls were needed and that I’d thought of making my campaign slogan “Get swept into office with wastebaskets in the halls.” Feeble? Yes, but it got a laugh. Also, another student and I briefly had a sort of standup act. My partner did foreign accents, the effectiveness of which was enhanced by the fact that most of the people in that audience of Kansas City high-school students had never met a foreigner. The one joke I can remember from the act was a weatherman saying, “Tomorrow will be muggy, followed by Tueggy, Weggy, Thurggy, and Frieggy.” My only defense for that one is that we didn’t make it up; we stole it from a radio disk jockey. At graduation, I wasn’t voted the Funniest Boy. That honor, as I remember, went to a classmate who acted out the records of Spike Jones and His City Slickers, a band that was to music more or less what the Harlem Globetrotters are to basketball.

PERSONAL HISTORY

SOME NOTES ON FUNNINESS

Going for the laughs.

BY CALVIN TRILLIN

ILLUSTRATION BY TAMARA SHOPSIN
was voted third Most Likely to Succeed. Third Most Likely to Succeed—now, that’s funny.

CASUALS

A stickler for precise language would probably argue that the bookstore shelf labelled “Humor” should really say “Attempts at Humor,” since the word standing alone implies that everyone will be amused. (Describing yourself as a humorist, Ring Lardner said, would be like a baseball player who’d been asked which position he plays saying, “I’m a great third baseman.”) What strikes one person as funny might strike another person as not funny at all. If that scowling man at one of the near tables doesn’t think what the comic just said was funny, there’s no use trying to persuade him that it was. A reminder that the audience at the dinner show found the same joke hilarious wouldn’t help.

For those of us whose attempts at humor are mostly written rather than verbal, the audience is an editor—an audience we, unlike the standup comic, have to please without the tools of timing or expression. In the first decades of my time at The New Yorker, the pieces that we were trying to sell—the sort of light pieces that would these days run under the rubric of Shouts & Murmurs or possibly Personal History—were referred to around the office as “casuals.” Some of the people submitting casuals were, like me, reporters who thought of casual-writing as a sideline. Some were fiction writers drawing a small salary that was ostensibly for writing Talk of the Town pieces. Some were people with no connection to the magazine who simply thought they had come up with something funny. Burton Bernstein, a colleague who published a biography of James Thurber, the nonpareil producer of casuals, wrote once that the casual, which sounds like something tossed off, is actually “one of the more difficult and painstaking forms of writing known to humankind.”

Contemplating casual-writing over the past fifty years or so, I’m reminded of how I began a talk I once gave to people graduating from Columbia with master’s-of-fine-arts degrees. “When I tried to think of an appropriate subject for people going into the fields you’re going into,” I said, “the only thing I could come up with was ‘Rejection.’” It’s not that we didn’t sell some casuals. But what stands out in my memory is rejection.

Burt Bernstein, for instance, worked for untold hours on a palindromic casual. It was in the form of a play called “Look, Ma, I Am Kool!,” and it had characters delivering lines like “Nail a timid god on rood. Door no dog, dim Italian.” The New Yorker passed. The alternative market for palindromic casuals was not large. Some months later, Burt showed up at my office to announce that he was compiling and editing a book of casuals written by the generation that followed the legendary era of New Yorker writers like Thurber and Benchley and White and Perlman. He asked if I had any pieces that might be included.

“If I may ask,” I said, “am I correct in thinking that this is essentially a scheme you’ve hatched to get ‘Look, Ma, I Am Kool!’ into print?”

“But of course,” Burt said cheerfully.

“In that case,” I said, “Count me in.” For a time, the magazine had a policy of tacking on a bonus for anyone who sold six casuals in a calendar year. As I recall, the bonus was a higher rate for casuals sold during the remainder of the year, but I always imagined it as something akin to the pinball machine in the movie version of William Saroyan’s “Time of Your Life”: when the machine is finally beaten, lights flash and bells ring and an American flag pops out to wave while “America” is played. Toward the end of one year in what must have been the mid-sixties, Tom Meehan and I had both sold five, and our typewriters were burning up. Tom had written one of the magazine’s iconic casuals—“Yma Dream,” presented as his dream of hosting a party at which he has to introduce people with names like Yma Sumac and Uta Hagen (“‘Ona and Ida,’ I say, ‘surely you know Yma and Ava? Ida, Ona—Oona, Abba.’”) But he couldn’t come up with the sixth casual that year. Neither could I. When I think of that period, the visual metaphor that comes to my mind is Tom and I meeting on the stairs between our floor and the appropriate editor’s office, one of us carrying a rejected casual and the other leafing through a palindromic casual that he had just written...
one of us carrying a casual that is about to be rejected.

In the mid-seventies, Tom, a lovely man, seemed to be struggling. His wife was not well. Writing casuals and freelance pieces was a chancy occupation for a man with a family to support, and the project he'd spent years working on otherwise, the book for a musical, had the marks of a nonpaying long shot. Then, in 1977, the musical actually made it to Broadway. It was “Annie.” It won Tom the first of what turned out to be three Tony Awards, and it seemed destined to run forever.

Not long after “Annie” opened, my wife and daughters and I had tea with Tom and some of the kids who appeared in the musical. I told Tom that everyone at the magazine was delighted about his reversal of fortune. He said that there had been a time when he was beginning to feel like that Woody Allen character in “Annie Hall,” who said life is divided into the terrible and the miserable.

“A Broadway hit can change a lot,” I said.

Tom smiled, and said, quietly, “Smash hit.”

That same year, Burt Bernstein’s anthology was published. It contained, after an astute foreword by Burt on the state of what he termed “literate humor,” contributions from a wide range of casual writers. (I contributed two of my favorites—both New Yorker rejects that had eventually found homes in other magazines.) The title of the anthology was “Look, Ma, I Am Kool! And Other Casuals.”

HERE’S JOHNNY

An essential fact about being a guest on a late-night talk show is this: you don’t have to answer the question. It’s not at all like being interviewed on “60 Minutes.” If you’re asked about how you came to write your novel, and, knowing that a thorough answer could induce mass drowsiness, you tell an amusing story about your mother’s cooking, the host is perfectly satisfied. He’s in the business of entertainment, not information gathering.

During roughly the final fifteen years that Johnny Carson hosted the “Tonight Show,” I was a guest on the show a couple of times a year. I was almost always in what we called the authors’ ghetto—the final guest on the program, the guest who was fated to be bumped if the show went too long. By chance, I never did get bumped, and one time I was actually not last. I was followed by a man who played the saw—the rare guest who, if necessary, as expendable as a writer.

Appearing on the “Tonight Show” was an odd and unexpected gig for someone whose main line of work was doing reporting pieces for The New Yorker—one evening, the guests were Mr. Rogers, Hulk Hogan, and me—but I enjoyed doing it. I found it easy to talk to Johnny Carson. Part of the reason, I always thought, was that we came from the same part of the country and had similar notions of what was funny. I admired his skill. He could extend a guest’s joke without taking the joke away, for instance, and he could enliven a flat remark with a quip or an expression. That skill was comforting to a guest waiting in the greenroom to go on: it greatly reduced the chances that your appearance would turn into a total debacle.

After the show was taped, the “talent coördinator” who booked me, Jim McCawley, and I would often repair to a nearby Mexican restaurant for a snack before I was picked up and deposited at the airport for the red-eye to New York. One evening, Jim said that Johnny (everyone called him Johnny) was interested in having more “civilians”—that is, non-show-business people—on the program. He’d recently been impressed with a chicken-plucker. (I neglected to ask whether that civilian plucked chickens on the air or demonstrated a new chicken-plucking machine or displayed a talent completely unconnected with his chosen profession.) When Jim asked if I had any suggestions, I said, “I know a remarkable smoke-ring blower—Harry Garrison, from Cincinnati. His personality takes a bit of getting used to—he can seem imperious, particularly when he’s demanding still air for his performance and says something like ‘I detect the sound of human breathing’—but he’s an absolutely brilliant smoke-ring blower. By far the best smoke-ring blower I’ve ever seen. Maybe the best there is.”

“What does he do for a living?” Jim asked, assuming correctly that smoke-ring blowing had to be a sort of sideline.

“He’s a player-piano dealer and calliope restorer,” I said.

Jim looked excited. “Where do I find him?” he said.

No more than three or four days later, Jim phoned to say, “Watch Tuesday.” I couldn’t believe it. I assumed that there were movie stars who’d waited months or even years for a booking on the “Tonight Show”—perhaps demeaning themselves in a variety of ways in attempting to hurry along the process. Harry Garrison had been booked after one phone call from Jim McCawley.

Then I got busy finishing a piece of reporting and totally forgot to watch the show on Tuesday. The next day, I was having lunch with a friend who asked, “Did you happen to see Carson last night? There was the strangest thing—a guy trying to blow smoke rings.”

“Did you say ‘trying’?” I said.

Apparently, the air-conditioning system in the studio hadn’t been taken into account. Harry went through his whole act, imperiousness and all, but he produced only smoky clouds. I phoned Jim McCawley. “Well, I told you he wasn’t much of a smoke-ring blower,” I said. “Charming guy, in his own way, but not really a first-class smoke-ring blower.”

“Are you kidding?” Jim said. “He’s sure to be on ‘The Best of Carson’.”

I could imagine Johnny, arms folded, taking in Harry’s performance with the stare he’d use for observing, say, a man who’d come on to demonstrate a bubble-making machine he’d invented but couldn’t seem to start the two-stroke motor that powered it. The Harry Garrison segment was indeed on “The Best of Carson,” in a short section devoted to what Johnny called disasters. In the right hands, a man trying to blow smoke rings can be funny.

I don’t think Harry Garrison ever thought it was funny. He was, after all, a brilliant smoke-ring blower—a man known in magician circles as the Smoke-Ring King. He hadn’t intended to be the fall guy in a comedy routine. Still, when he died, in 2013, an obituary in the Cincinnati Enquirer did say, without elaborating, that his career as a performer included an appearance on the “Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson. ♦
I didn’t like school when I was a kid, and I **REALLY** didn’t like seventh grade.

One reason for this was my English teacher, Mrs. N.

She was young and pretty. She liked the pretty, popular girls, and they adored her.

We loathed each other.

I didn’t want trouble. But one day I drew a cartoon about her in my memo pad...

...which I accidentally left in my desk at the end of the class.

My name was on the cover, but I guess she couldn’t resist.

After class, she called me to her desk.

She sent me home with a note:

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Chast,
Please come see me for a conference about your daughter.
Mrs. N.

I heard all about it later from my mother...

...who, as an assistant principal in schools all over Brooklyn, had been “around the block”.

I still remember the drawing:

IF YOU WANT TO BE A TEACHER, YOU CAN’T LET A STUPID CARTOON THROW YOU!

Mrs. N never bothered me again.
GREETINGS, FRIENDS!

Friends one and all! Let us unmute, Excite the timbrel and the lute, Make merry with our pots and pan (The hour is seven, so we can), Shout from the balcony or lawn For joy at what will soon be gone, And praises sing for what is here: The end to this undreamt-of year! Commune with us, dear friends, while we Strew gifts abundant ’round the tree, And help us pick out something nice For New York’s Dr. David Price, The Bronx’s Dr. Ernest Patti, Every nurse in Cincinnati, Dr. L. Woodward, of U. Miss., Dr. Pernell (she’s our own Chris), L.A.’s Dr. Anna Darby, Arizona’s Dr. Barbee, Harold Varmus, the Nobel-er (Doc of reputation stellar), Ashley Bartholomew, R.N. And when we check the list again It unscrolls out across the floor, With health-care stalwarts by the score— By the millions! Heroes true! (Forgive their student-loan debts—do!) As we replay two-oh in slo-mo, A Christmas cheer for Andrew Cuomo Is not amiss, nor would it be For bat virologist Zheng-Li Shi, Steak Diane, the cool mask-maker, Dolly Parton, Peter Baker, Jennifer O’Malley Dillon, Issa Rae, Calvin (Bud) Trillin, Stacey Abrams, Mikie Sherrill, Andrew Rea, and Colin Farrell. The passing Comet Neowise, Which, lacking hands, can’t sanitize Them, yearns to be the wise men’s star Instead, and shining from afar Lays tender beams upon A. Blinken, Dr. Fauci, and, we’re thinkin’, Too, on David Miliband, A’Lelia Bundles, Michael Land, Gretchen Whitmer, fearless gov, Jon Ossoff, whom we’re so fond of, Chris Krebs, and Tyler, the Creator; Brightly and not one bit later, It shines on Amy Westervelt, Whose podcast, we have always felt, Is great; on Alice Oswald, too; And, similarly, on a few Deserving folks like James McBride, Fern Finkel (Brooklyn’s courtroom pride), Reid Singer, Mr. Brokaw (Tom), Meg Knox, and wondrous Rosa Baum. “Yay!” for Jack and Marta Handey, And our ol’ pal Peter Canby! A super surge of Christmas glee To Joe and Jill from me and thee, And all good things to Kamala And Doug from us and Momma-la. This year, just in case you’ve wondered, Roger Angell turned a hundred! Unequalled master of this rhyme From back when it was in its prime, He rocks! And so does Peggy Moorman, Who is the best and that’s for sure, man! To those who lift us up: Godspeed! We hope Josh Gad has all he’ll need; For Alexander Vindman And bro Yevgeny, we’ve a plan To wish them both benignity; And with no loss of dignity Shout season’s blessings to Jack Black, Mystery writer Steven Womack, Jay Inslee, John Hickenlooper, David Chichester, Chris Cooper (With, by the by, a friendly “Hi!” To V.P. Pence’s pensive fly). Should Christmas comfort be deployed, May it descend on Terrence Floyd, Phelonise Floyd, and their relations (Rev. Al, thanks for your oration); May peace, whatever peace there be, Enfold the family Arbery; May justice come to all who thirst And hunger for it through the worst. Dear friends, if we could rhyme away The year’s vast losses, we might say These stumbling lines were justified As right in step with Christmastide. Does meter link up hope and history? The only rhyme word here is “mystery.” Let gladness rise, despite, despite; “Love one another” routs the night, And kindness is a folding chair We carry with us everywhere. In depth of winter, prospects brighten; Mighty streams of light will lighten The miles ahead, and goodness reign— Once more, the angels’ grand refrain!

—Ian Frazier
THE MUSEUM OF PURGATORY BY ALI FITZGERALD

The past ten months have felt like an eternal time loop.

It’s as though we’re living in the cinematic oblivion of “Groundhog Day” or “Russian Doll” —

— but without the charm of Natasha Lyonne or a soothsaying woodchuck.

Our limbo reminds me of my adolescent obsession with the afterlife.

As a teen-ager, I loved the comfort of God punch lines in New Yorker cartoons and the campy hell of nineties supernatural TV.

But it was the in-between netherworld of purgatory that mirrored my painful high-school reality.
I liked the murky contours of Purgatory—it could be anything.

Dante envisioned it as a multistoried layer cake of venial sins.

In Katherine of Cleves' Book of Hours, Purgatory is some kind of yawning cat-castle.

Tim Burton depicted it as a waiting room teeming with spooky bureaucracy.

Indeed, waiting is what most visions of Purgatory have in common.

I can't go on like this. That's what you think.
A FEW YEARS AGO, WHILE WAITING FOR MY LIFE TO CHANGE, I STUMBLED ONTO ONE MAN’S ATTEMPT TO CATALOGUE ETERNAL SUFFERING.

THE MUSEUM OF PURGATORY IS HOUSED IN ONE OF ROME’S ONLY NEO-GOTHIC CHURCHES. IT’S AN EERIE SPECTRE IN A SEA OF SUNNY ANTIQUITY.

THE INTERIOR IS APPROPRIATELY DARK AND CRYPTIC.

EVERY STEP SEEMS TO ECHO.

A WUNDERKAMMER OF OTHERWORLDLY ITEMS IS TUCKED INTO A CORRIDOR.
EACH OBJECT WAS REPORTEDLY CHARRED BY THE SMOLDERING HANDS OF A SOUL, REACHING OUT FROM PURGATORY.

THERE ARE FIVE FINGERPRINTS SINGED INTO A PRAYER BOOK, LEFT BY THE DECEASED JOSEPH SCHITZ IN 1838.

AND THERE IS THE NIGHTCAP OF LUIGI LE SÉNÉCHAL, CRUMPLED AFTER A VISITATION FROM HIS LATE WIFE.

A SMALL WOODEN TABLE IS INCISED WITH A HEAVY CROSS AND HAND, A TOKEN LEFT BY THE FORMER ABBOT OLIVETANO OF MANTUA FOR MOTHER ISABELLA FORNARI IN 1731.
All these relics were gathered by a priest from Marseille, Victor Jouët.

After a fire razed the chapel of the Chiesa del Sacro Cuore del Suffragio, in 1897, Jouët went sifting through the rubble.

Behind the scorched altar, he made out an image impressed on the wall.

He interpreted the smoky form as a sad, translucent face, a soul seeking to contact the living.

Jouët read this as a message from the hereafter—he needed to help other trapped souls.

So he set off across Europe to acquire artifacts that would prove purgatory’s existence to nonbelievers.
As an ex-Catholic and a current cynic, I was not convinced by Jouët's Museum that Purgatory is an actual destination.

But Purgatory as a state of mind seems very real these days.

It's a place straddling normalcy and the abyss.

Where you ask yourself, "How long can this last?"

A standstill that highlights the things shifting and changing in our world—

While allowing us brief moments to appreciate things that never change.

Oh, shoot—how could I have forgotten to tell them about the dinosaurs?
'Tis the season for festive holiday garb, but with new pandemic lockdowns around the corner you might ask yourself, "What's the point in dressing up?" Well, you may be trapped inside, but that's no reason to look like it! Here are four fresh, above-the-waist ensembles that will kill at your next socially distanced meeting. Cut on the dotted line to test them out!

A throwback look for your next design briefing.
Show'm who's boss from the comfort of your study with this sharp look. Make sure to turn the spines of those power books out so your employees know you've earned your place at the top.

This outfit goes from the virtual boardroom to happy hour without missing a beat. Of course, you won't actually be going anywhere, so sensible shoes are a no-brainer.

Love in the time of COVID-19? It's a jungle out there. Flaunt your best side on your next virtual date with this bold look. Try some background foliage to complete the tropical theme.
“Stand back—I am retrieving a cardigan from the ‘thrice-weekly Zoom happy hours’ era.”
“I miss when we could sit close enough to hear conversations more interesting than ours.”

“Who’s coming with me?”

Jerry Maguire Now

“Who’s coming with me?”
"I can't tell if she needs to stop goofing off or take a break from studying."
"We’ve built so much good will with the neighbors. Let’s not use it up with compulsive vacuuming."

"Now everyone wants to talk."
“Forget about what else is going on in the world. As soon as we put on this uniform, it’s our job to remain creepy.”
“Since you miss parties so much, I thought you could chase your dinner tonight.”

“What did I tell you about overfeeding the sourdough starter?”
NEW SHADES 2020

Secret Sauce
The perfect shade to wear under your mask. Non-staining.

Evening in Nyack
Great for watching police procedurals, baking banana bread, or just staring into space.

My Fauci
Apply before bed and we guarantee you will meet each other on the astral plane.

R.C.S
“Ahhh! The great outdoors!”
I grew up on a small farm on a big river.

The river was called the Fraser.

My parents worked hard on the farm morning to night. We children worked, too, even on school days. There was always something to be done.

We grew produce for ourselves and, in later years, our stall at the farmers' market.

We even had some white leghorn chickens who laid eggs. A man in a Model T truck came once a week to pick them up.

Our farm was next door to a brown one-room schoolhouse. It was there that I first spoke English.
I would walk to school on the gravel road atop the dike that kept the water back. Some of the houses were built on stilts, others on floating logs...

Almost all of our neighbors fished for a living in the summer. In the winter, we prepared our nets and painted the boats for the upcoming season.

...When the tide went out, the floating houses sometimes settled at grotesque angles.

The Salmon came up the Fraser starting in early spring. Different species arrived at different times. The most valuable was the sockeye, which was good for canning.
My father hated fishing. There was something about the irregular hours that he abhorred. As a result, we were not very successful in the beginning.

I loved being on the river, and as soon as I was old enough I spent all my time in the summer fishing.

Our Japanese boats were smaller, with less powerful motors, because we were allowed to fish only in certain districts. Our Norwegian neighbors could move between districts and even follow the fish out to the ocean.

**BANG!**

At the start of the week, a gun went off to signal that fishing had begun.

First, we threw in the buoy with a flag. Attached to the buoy was the net, which we slowly shovelled out until all 150 fathoms were laid. Great care had to be taken to prevent the lines from tangling or drifting in the currents.
Great fights would break out when someone thought his neighbor’s net was getting too close. Some cheated.

Sometimes, when it was foggy, we would quietly lower our nets before the starting gun, too.

We lived across from one of the best fishing spots, near a big island in the middle of the river. The water flowed around the land, forming a sandbar, and the fish liked to swim up the shallow waters.

Many, of course, wanted to fish there and we had to drop our anchors and wait our turn. The boats formed a lineup, which we called a “junban.”

Sometimes we would wait two or three hours. Of course, this led to lots of swapping of stories.

Fishermen are not always so candid about the number of fish they’ve caught, although everyone had a pretty good idea. Some were “high boat” year after year, others always “low boat.” Catching no fish meant you were “skunked.”
Sunbury was our home, and our parents would probably have lived there forever. My father was making plans to build a new house on our farm when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and everything changed.

Our family was forced to leave our farm and live in camps in the interior of British Columbia, far away from the water. The farm, boat, and equipment were seized by the Canadian government and sold for a pittance.

We never returned to B.C. to live.

Seized fishing boats
I moved East to attend law school and eventually settled in Toronto. Some of my best memories are of summers on the Fraser.

I have been back to British Columbia and fished for salmon twice. I skunked once, but last time I landed one coho and one jack spring.

This comic is adapted from unpublished papers written by my grandfather George Takakazu Tamaki. He died in 1993.
ACTING CLASS
BY NICK DRNASO

WHAT’S SO FUNNY?

NOTHING, I JUST THOUGHT OF SOMETHING.

DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH ROOM?

YES, THANKS.

THANKS AGAIN FOR DRIVING.

OF COURSE, I FEEL MORE SECURE OUT HERE WITH A BIG GROUP.
I love it. I'm only going to this meeting to get out of the city.

I just feel more comfortable around crowds and buildings.

Dennis has trouble being alone with himself.

You think? Is that it?

What? You've said so yourself.

I've said I'm more of a people person.

I don't like it out here, either. I grew up in an area like this.

Oh, you did? Well, it must be hard to live in isolation, but it does seem peaceful.

I don't know. I felt like I was going crazy.

I wanted to raise Marcus in a different environment.

How old did you say your son is?

Three.

That's a crucial age in development.

Uh-huh. That's something I think about a lot.
HAHA!

WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR MIND?

NOTHING! IT WOULD TAKE TOO LONG TO EXPLAIN.

PULL OVER. I THINK I MISSED THE TURN.

LET'S DOUBLE BACK.

THERE!

GEEZ, HOW DID WE MISS THAT?

HA, I KNOW, RIGHT?

HE WARNED US ABOUT THIS.

WHAT'S THAT?

OK, THIS IS GOOD. MAKE A RIGHT HERE.
HE SAID TO DRIVE UNTIL THE ROAD ENDS AND WE'LL BE THERE.

I GUESS WE'RE NOT THE FIRST PEOPLE HERE.

OK, I HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING.

AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO FEELS WEIRD ABOUT THIS?

IT IS MUCH FARTHER AWAY THAN I THOUGHT.

DID ANY OF YOU TELL SOMEONE WHERE YOU WOULD BE?

MY AUNT HAS THE ADDRESS. SHE'LL KNOW SOMETHING IS WRONG IF I'M NOT BACK BY MIDNIGHT.

WHAT ARE WE GETTING OURSELVES INTO?

I'M SUDDENLY FEELING VERY PEACEFUL OUT HERE. I THINK I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN NOW.

COME ON. AT WORST, IT WILL BE A WASTE OF TIME OR A GOOD STORY.
How's everyone feeling?

Let's do a simple warmup.

I'm going to whisper an emotion to one of you, then you'll translate that emotion through your facial expression, and the group will have to guess the correct emotion.

The goal is to turn your face into a mask on command, and for the audience to be able to recognize the emotion instantly.

This can be enormously useful in performing and in life.

Who wants to go first?

Rayanne?

Angry.

Anger.

Perfect. Nice and clear.
GOOD JOB, EVERYONE.

I READ ABOUT A STUDY WHICH FOUND THAT, STATISTICALLY, PEOPLE WHO HOLD SOME KIND OF BELIEF LIVE LONGER LIVES. HAPPY PEOPLE LIVE LONGER AS WELL.

THAT MEANS OUR MISSION IS OBVIOUS, TO BELIEVE IN SOMETHING AND TO BE HAPPY.

I READ THAT ARTICLE. IT ALSO SAID THAT DEPRESSED PEOPLE TEND TO SEE THE WORLD MORE ACCURATELY.

WELL, THAT'S DEPRESSING.

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO FIGURE OUT WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY, OR SAD, FOR THAT MATTER, OR ANGRY, OR AFRAID.

SO HERE'S TONIGHT'S EXERCISE: YOU'RE ALL GOING ON A SOLO JOURNEY.

YOU'LL HAVE TO RELY SOLELY ON YOUR IMAGINATION. THERE IS NO PROMPT AND THERE ARE NO GUIDELINES.

CREATE A SCENE IN YOUR MIND AS COMPLETELY AS POSSIBLE. PUT YOURSELF IN THE SCENARIO, ARRANGE SOME ELEMENTS, AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

WE WON'T SHARE THE RESULTS WHEN THIS IS OVER. SO DON'T FEEL INHIBITED. THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE INTENSELY PERSONAL.

IF ONE SCENE FAILS OR RUNS ITS COURSE, JUST START A NEW ONE. YOU'LL BE SURPRISED WHERE YOUR MIND GOES IN DESPERATION.

EVERYONE TAKE A CLAIM IN A PART OF THE ROOM.
GET COMFORTABLE. LIE DOWN IF IT HELPS.

THIS EXERCISE IS ALSO ABOUT TRUST. YOU'RE ALL IN THIS UNKNOWN PLACE TOGETHER. IT ONLY WORKS IF YOU SUBMIT TO THE PROCESS.

NOW EVERYONE CLOSE YOUR EYES.

BEGIN.

IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE A NICE WEEK.

YEAH?

THANK GOD, RIGHT?

YEAH.
There’s an article in this magazine. It says that people who believe in something tend to live longer lives.

Really? That’s fascinating. What do you think about that?

I’m open to everything. I’m a spiritual kind of guy.

Mm.

Hey, if I believe everything, maybe I’ll live longer than everyone!

Heh.

There has to be something running it all.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Excuse me?

Seriously.

Well, seriously. Yeah. I think I did. When I was a kid.

We had a Christmas party at our house. I was looking out the window every few minutes, waiting for my favorite cousin to show up.

Then I saw this person dressed in a long coat with a hood. They waved at me, then disappeared. I swear to God.

I ran and told my dad, and he promised he would check every inch of the house before bed.

Later, when I was supposed to be asleep, I heard him making fun of me to the rest of the family.
NICE NEIGHBORHOOD. I’LL HAVE TO INTRODUCE MYSELF TO EVERYONE.

THIS MUST BE WHAT JOHN WAS TALKING ABOUT. IT WASN’T SO HARD.

WHERE’S ROSIE? I SHOULD CALL HER. SHE’LL LOVE THIS.

I SUPPOSE I NEED A STORY. THIS CAN’T GO ON FOREVER.

THERE SHOULD BE SOME KIND OF CONFLICT. BUT HOW? I’M IN PARADISE!

I KNOW! I’LL INVITE MY WHOLE FAMILY UP HERE.

THEY WON’T KNOW WHAT TO SAY WHEN THEY SEE THIS PLACE. THERE’S A PRIVATE ROOM FOR EVERY ONE OF THEM.

FIRST THING TOMORROW, I’LL CALL THEM WITH THE INVITATION.

WHAT THE HELL?!

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME.

HEY! YOUR NEIGHBOR IS TRYING TO SLEEP!

Z Z Z

Z Z Z

Z Z Z

Z Z Z

Z Z Z

Z Z Z

Z Z Z
I LIVE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD, TOO, PAL!

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING. I'M GOING TO HAVE TO MOVE!

STOP. PLEASE STOP!

DUMB HICK. WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THIS COMMUNITY? OK., DEEP BREATHS.

HEY, DENNIS.

OH, HEY, MATT. IT'S A RELIEF TO SEE YOU.

ROUGH NIGHT?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS, BUT I'M ACTUALLY GLAD TO BE BACK AT WORK.

ANYTHING ELSE? THE CHECK?
The Greenman

Hi. You made it. Thanks for coming.

I'm happy to be here.

Let me take your coat.

Why did you want me to come over?

Well, I've just been sitting here. Nothing has happened the entire night.

I know that he said the possibilities are endless, but I can't seem to leave the house.

I think I know what you mean.

So after a few hours, I thought I should check on Marcus...

...something is terribly wrong.

What is it?

He's not himself.

I don't know what to do.

Can I meet him?
ARE YOU SURE?

I'VE HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT HIM.

ALL RIGHT, JUST BE CAREFUL.

MARCUS?

WE'RE COMING IN.

OH.

I WANT YOU TO MEET A GOOD FRIEND. THIS IS ROSIE.

HI THERE, MARCUS.

STILL CAN'T SLEEP?

I LIKE YOUR ROOM. IT'S COOL.

BE CAREFUL WITH THAT.
AH!

CALM DOWN!

OW!

NO!

GET OUT!

-SNF-

WHAT HAPPENED?

I DON'T KNOW.

HE'S TOO BIG TO FIT THROUGH THE DOOR.

IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME.

UNTIL WHAT?

UNTIL HE'S TOO FAR GONE.
ROSIE, IT’S THREE.

WHAT?

IT’S THREE IN THE MORNING.

FUCK!

RAYANNE, WE HAVE TO GO. IT’S THREE IN THE MORNING.

OH, NO. I NEED TO GET HOME!

OH, GOOD. ARE YOU ALL DONE?

WHAT THE HELL? WHY DIDN’T YOU WAKE US UP?

YOU’RE NOT GONNA SAY ANYTHING? SOME OF US HAVE TO WORK IN THE MORNING.

I DON’T GET INTO CONFLICT WITH MY CLASSES, IT’S NOT HELPFUL.

THIS IS RIDICULOUS.

I’M REALLY SORRY IF YOU FEEL THAT I MADE THE WRONG DECISION. BUT I HAVE MY METHODS, AND I WAS DOING WHAT I THOUGHT WAS RIGHT.

COME ON, WAKE UP, EVERYBODY.
A spoonerism is a familiar phrase whose initial sounds have been swapped to make a wacky phrase: for example, “bear hug” and “hair bug.” Can you decipher these illustrated spoonerisms?

Match the hair style with its famous owner.

1. a. FRIDA KAHLO
2. b. VENUS OF WILLENDORF
3. c. PRINCE VALIANT
4. d. ANGELA DAVIS
5. e. SALVADOR DALI
6. f. JOSEPHINE BAKER
7. g. PRINCESS LEIA
8. h. MR. CLEAN
9. i. WILLIE NELSON/ RENATA ADLER

A spoonerism is a familiar phrase whose initial sounds have been swapped to make a wacky phrase: for example, “bear hug” and “hair bug.” Can you decipher these illustrated spoonerisms?
Can you improve these classic poems?

**SELF-CARE CROSSWORD**

**ACROSS**
1. Tip #1: Have a _____ day at home! Turn the shower into a steam room.
4. Tip #2: Moisturize! Put on some lotion and _____ balm.
5. Tip #3: _____ a pot of relaxing scented chamomile.
7. Tip #4: Stay hydrated (and don’t forget to _____!).
8. Tip #5: Get on the phone with your friends and _____ for a while.

**DOWN**
1. Tip #6: Go back to _____, you’ve earned it.
2. Tip #7: Eat an entire lemon-meringue _____, you’ve earned it.
3. Tip #8: Open the meditation ____ on your phone to find that your free trial has ended.

**SECRET ANSWER KEY**

**Spot the differences:** Pretty much everything.

**Splitting hairs:** 1 (d); 2 (f); 3 (g); 4 (e); 5 (b); 6 (i); 7 (a); 8 (c); 9 (h).

**ANIMAL Spoonerisms:**
- crushing blow (blushing crow)
- funny bone (bunny phone)
- box fan (fox ban)
- dense fog (fence dog)
- crime lab (lime crab)

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**CHANGE-A-VERSE**

**BECAUSE I CAME NOT FOR TO SKY**

He kindly stops me from being
The _____ held but just ______
And _____ _____.

Everywhere
And all the _____ did _____

(first noun again) ! (first noun a fourth time), everywhere.

Nor any ______ to ______.

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**ANSWER KEY: SPOT THE DIFFERENCES:** Pretty much everything.
anyone who came of age in the latter part of the twentieth century will recall the constant flow of animated cartoons that made up most of children’s programming on TV. In a culture of supposedly short memories, they were an art form that reached right back across time. On the radio, “oldies” were a separate genre within pop music, but on the kids’ shows there was a steady stream of cartoons from half a century’s creation, reality intruding mostly with commercials for pre-sweetened breakfast cereals. Everything ran together: bending, bug-eyed dogs and cats playing bad swing jazz on living clarinets from the thirties, spinach cans popping open and tattooed muscles popping up from the nineteen-forties, and Japanese animation of the sixties so limited that it hardly moved.

There appeared to be a boundless reservoir of historical cartoon styles—with some, the Bugs Bunny cartoons, clearly made on a theatrical scale and with big budgets and full orchestras, and others, like the Bullwinkle cartoons, cheaply made but slyly imagined, rich in satiric push. It all came at the viewer from the thirties, spinach cans popping open and tattooed muscles popping up from the nineteen-forties, and Japanese animation of the sixties so limited that it hardly moved.

In “Wild Minds: The Artists and Rivalries That Inspired the Golden Age of Animation” (Atlantic Monthly Press), Reid Mitenbuler recalls that flood—and points out that the vintage cartoons within it were often censored by later distributors in ways that robbed them of their original spice and sex appeal. Of the kinds of popular books that have proliferated in the past few decades—the little thing that changed everything (cod, longitude, porcelain), the crime or scandal that time forgot (Erik Larson’s specialty)—none are more potent than the tale of the happy band of brothers who came together to redirect the world. The genre runs from Tom Wolfe’s “The Right Stuff” through Jenny Uglow’s “The Lunar Men,” and Mitenbuler’s “Wild Minds” is an attempt to do the same for the history of American animation.

“Wild Minds” assembles its history with love and a sense of occasion. The chronicle that results, as Mitenbuler explains in a prefatory note, also appears at a moment when, for the first time in the history of the form, everything is available. Obscurities that in the past one would have waited years to find in a stray MOMA screening are now online. Even the lewd (though government-sponsored) “Private Snafu” cartoons, made for G.I.s during the Second World War and written by Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, can be found at a touch of the YouTube tab. The act of pulling everyone together in this way is new, and significant. The peculiar excellence of “The Right Stuff” was not that it showed astronauts to the world but that it showed the astronauts as worldly. Wolfe explained that they were far from dim-witted test pilots: they knew what they were doing and what was being done to them. Mitenbuler’s larger aim is similar: to show us that the best cartoonists were not hapless hazard artisans but self-aware artists, working against the constraints of commerce toward a knowing end of high comic, and sometimes serious, art. The book’s governing idea lies in its heroes’ collective intuition that animated films could be a vehicle for grownup expression—erotic, political, and even scientific—rather than the trailing diminutive form they mostly became. A cartoon tradition that could seem child-bound, sexless, and stereotyped was once vital, satiric, and experimental.

Mitenbuler explains that the familiar form of the cartoon arose, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because the same persistence of vision that enables a rapid sequence of photographic stills to give the illusion of movement works if you draw the images, with a pen. The joy of this discovery, made by a close succession of animators, was that it set you free from the constraints of realism: you could make anything you imagined exist on film, from waltzing dinosaurs to talking mice. Along with this discovery came a subsequent, painful one—that drawing the frames, one by one, was insanely laborious and expensive. (The commercial history of animation from then on was basically a contest between the pleasure taken in
Betty Boop, remembered now mainly for her “Boop-oop-a-doop” cry, was in her day a full-fledged mini-Mae West.
seeing the extravagant imagination come alive and the shortcuts that had to be devised in order to draw the pictures ever more cheaply.)

Very early animation has a single theme, the fluidity of form: what’s sometimes called the first fully animated film, the French “Fantasmagorie” (1908), is a two-minute-long study in visual metamorphosis, stick figures caught in a constantly changing two-dimensional world. The first hero of Mitenbuler’s American story is therefore Winsor McCay, the author of the “Little Nemo in Slumberland” series, the amazing accounts of dream experience that anticipate Surrealist fantasy. We learn that McCay, though best remembered now as a visionary fantasist, was also an editorial cartoonist in the Hearst stable. Nor did McCay see his inventions primarily as a means of entertainment. In 1916, after projecting his “Gertie the Dinosaur” cartoon as part of a vaudeville act, he invested his talents and money in a twelve-minute—long for the time—animated version of the sinking of the ocean liner Lusitania, which had been torpedoed by a German U-boat the previous year, with a huge loss of life.

Though drawn in McCay’s distinctive Art Nouveau-ish style—two elegant fish under the ocean watch an ominous torpedo approaching with dismay, and turn away in synchrony—it is still piercing to watch. The sequence in which the ship tips over into the water, as human figures leap from it in dignified silhouette, is more memorable and affecting than anything in “Titanic,” exactly for its stylized equanimity. We register the tiny figures coming down ropes, the neatly outlined eruptions billowing smoke, the inkblot clouds of fire, the ship sinking beneath the hand-drawn waves—it’s like an early newsreel reimagined by Hiroshige.

But McCay was limited by William Randolph Hearst, who owned him as a kind of property and valued his political–editorial work, while seeing little profit in animation. In “Wild Minds,” McCay then retreats, while Mitenbuler’s Chuck Yeager figure—the too often overlooked and audacious hero who inspires the later, better-known adventurers—is double: the Fleischer brothers, Max and David.

Though now mostly forgotten by non-experts, in the nineteen-twenties and early thirties the Fleischers seemed as likely as their great competitor, Walt Disney, to become the masters of animated cartoons. Proudly Jewish (their cartoons occasionally exploded with Hebrew lettering) and extremely louche (Mitenbuler speculates that they started the studio with money from the race track), they threw their careers away in a series of misadventures worthy of a Michael Chabon novel, choosing Florida over California as the place to make cartoons and then overindulging in the pleasures of the flesh once there. The Fleischers, we learn, began by inventing a once famous clown, Ko-Ko, who was a fellow-traveler of the first famous cartoon figure, Felix the Cat, both drawn under the orbit of Chaplin, whose influence on early animation can be found everywhere.

The Fleischers didn’t see why animation needed to remain a diminutive form. Having made stake money with Ko-Ko, they took up what they thought was as obvious a subject for animation as, say, the adventures of Pocahontas or the working life of any number of dwarves: Einstein’s special and general theories of relativity. Earning Einstein’s approval, the silent film, released in 1923, is still an astonishingly early and sophisticated popularization of his theory. But lacking, perhaps, a mascot—L’il Al the Light Beam or the like—it was a flop, according to Mitenbuler. Two years later, undeterred, the Fleischers used the occasion of the Scopes trial to goose up a history of life on earth as imagined by Darwinian evolution. (It caused a riot at the American Museum of Natural History when it debuted, but seems to have made little money.)

The Fleischers—having secured backing from Paramount—had another go at presenting the drama of sexual reproduction: they invented Betty Boop, the first frankly sexy cartoon character. Later bowdlerized, and remembered now mainly for her “Boop-oop-a-doop” cry, Betty was in her day a full-fledged mini-Mae West. A zaztig Broadway showgirl, she went topless, routinely seduced Bimbo the dog, and was just as routinely seduced, and occasionally spanked, by her animal cartoon lover. (“Wanna be a member, wanna be a member?” she sings, after rubbing her hands up and down her body, in one bizarre fantasy about the initiation rites of a mystical order.)

A Disney princess Betty Boop was not. In the mid-thirties, her skirt got lengthened and her manners curbed when Catholic groups pressed the Production Code on Hollywood, and the Fleischers turned their attention to Popeye, from E. C. Segar’s lovely strip. They simplified the action; Popeye’s deus ex machina of spinach first became iconic in their cartoons. In one of the great misplaced bets in American show business, however, the Fleischers moved their studio to the nascent town of Miami, where their largely Jewish and very New York employees sometimes had a hard time with swamp insects and other swamp creatures. “On the mornings after Ku Klux Klan rallies, the air sometimes smelled like the turpentine used to burn the crosses,” Mitenbuler records. Many of them fled back home. (Others had already been poached by the Disney studio, all the way out in California.)

Even before this difficult time, the Fleischers—Max, especially—clearly had in mind the hot-ice-cream dream of a feature-length cartoon, made fearsomely difficult by the number of artists and the amount of time needed to produce so many frames. Time-saving tricks were sought. Max had developed the technique of rotoscoping, which is still in use and which enables live-action film to be overlaid with animation. It created the quivering, noir—El Greco effect of their heroic figures, including the Superman series of the early forties.

After Disney came out with a feature, the saccharine but successful “Snow White,” in 1937, Paramount finally gave the Fleischers the money to work on a feature of their own, a full-length version of “Gulliver’s Travels,” which was released in 1939. It lacks Swift’s satiric fire, but the juxtaposition of the rotoscoped and vividly human Gulliver with the smooth-edged cartoon Lilliputians has an almost creepy intensity that suits the subject. (In films with both human movement and cartoon movement, like “Who Framed Roger Rabbit,” it’s always the real-world footage that looks coarse, otherworldly, and disturbing.)

The contrast between the practices of the Disney studios in Los Angeles and those of the Fleischers in Miami—long in debt to Paramount—is the material for an American comedy. At Disney, classes in drawing and composition
Despite wearing the red rose of the intrepid Fleischers, Mitenbuler is kind to Disney—kinder than a cultural historian of an earlier vintage might have been. It wasn’t so long ago that “the Disney version” was the standard term for the worst kind of vulgarization of the classics. Disney is in better odor now, in part because of the proto-Spielberghian spell he seems to cast in his best work, like “Pinocchio,” and in part because the lurid legends circulated after his life, this usually good-natured man would, out his long and mostly unhappy after-rival than on a character flaw. Through-mishandling of his career on a business or, for that matter, his relationship with his brother. It was easier to blame his failure or inadequate. She documents conditions—raw sewage backing up into homes and yards—that led, in 2017, to the country’s first outbreak of hookworm in decades. Indisputable connections emerge between our nation’s history of slavery and sharecropping and the current inaccessibility, for some, of “the right to flush and forget.”

The Walker, by Matthew Beaumont (Verso). Contending that our “increasingly authoritarian” cities, with their omnipresent surveillance and commodified spaces, make the archetype of the flâneur—a privileged stroller who observes without being threatened—“unsustainable,” this heady blend of history and theory seeks more fitting literary models. The convalescent in Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” is a figure whose illness allows him, finally, to experience the city outside the daily grind. H. G. Wells’s “The Invisible Man” portrays a walker who is hounded and hunted. Beaumont depicts the city as unremittingly hostile, but his ambulatory antiheroes hint at ways in which we might reclaim the streets, declaring our freedom, as he puts it, “to wander and wonder at the same time.”

Waste, by Catherine Coleman Flowers (New Press). Making the case for investment in America’s rural population, this memoir moves from the author’s youthful civil-rights activism to her continuing fight against wastewater-infra-structure injustice. In Lowndes County, Alabama, where Flowers grew up, some ninety per cent of septic systems are failing or inadequate. She documents conditions—raw sewage backing up into homes and yards—that led, in 2017, to the country’s first outbreak of hookworm in decades. Indisputable connections emerge between our nation’s history of slavery and sharecropping and the current inaccessibility, for some, of “the right to flush and forget.”

The Orchard, by David Hopen (Ecco). The adolescent narrator of this début novel, Aryeh (Ari) Eden, grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn. When his family moves to the fictional town of Zion Hills, Florida, Ari is confronted with the privilege of his new yeshiva classmates. (“Everyone has a Chagall,” someone tells him.) His religious piety is soon challenged by secular distractions—Aston Martins, Olympic-sized swimming pools, house parties. Ari seeks out the “tragic grandeur” conferred by experience, even as he realizes that it disrupts his ideals and his sense of self. “I’d been filled, finally, with experience,” he says, after a blurry night out in Key West. “And yet along the way I’d been emptied out.”

Stillicide, by Cynan Jones (Catapult). One meaning of “stillicide” is a continual dripping of water, and the chapters of this novel collect like rainwater to tell the story of a dystopian Britain stricken by drought. Entrepreneurs propose razing homes to bring a giant iceberg into a London “ice dock,” a plan that sparks protests. Jones mostly focusses on the disempowered—a dying nurse who writes her husband a letter she’ll never send, a scientist who hopes his discovery will stop the Ice Dock, an elderly couple who refuse to leave their home despite rising sea levels. A laborer whose work on the Ice Dock will mean the destruction of his lover’s house muses, “How often the process of construction starts with destruction.”
death—that he was an anti-Semite who had himself frozen after death—turn out not to be true. Mitenbuler, while registering the relentless creep of formula into the work, gives Disney credit for genuine artistic innovation: “Fantasia,” with its high-art hungernings and a score featuring Paul Dukas and Igor Stravinsky, wasn’t the effort of a cynic. And, by eliminating sex, Disney landed, in an almost classic bit of Freudian-style sublimation, on evil, the forbidden energy that’s essential to any fable. Disney’s villainous characters—like the queen turned witch—tend to be more memorable than the doe-eyed good ones.

If the Fleischers are the doomed Hector of Mitenbuler’s tale, his favorites are the hyper-energetic, demonic band of cartoonists who helped establish the Warner Bros. animation studio in the thirties and forties, inventing Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Pepé Le Pew, and, eventually, Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. It was during one of those irresistible creative moments that, for a brief time, everything fell right: Mel Blanc, the voice artist, was integral to the invention of the characters. (At least one is a caricature of a studio executive.) Happy accidents happened: Porky Pig was voiced by an actor with an actual, frustrating stammer, who turned it to creative use. The wild-man directors of the “Looney Tunes” cartoons, Tex Avery and Chuck Jones, were hardly loony about their art. Avery and Tex, Frank Tashlin, were hardly loony about their art. Tashlin articulated their purpose bluntly: “We showed those Disney guys that animated cartoons don’t have to look like a fucking kids’ book,” he said. Chuck Jones’s list of rules for his art are acute and broadly applicable: “You must learn to respect that golden atom, that single-frame of action…The difference between lightning and the lightning bug may hinge on that single frame.” What is true of frames is true of words, and notes.

The Warner Bros. cartoons remain the high point of what might be called American Wise Guy comedy. Where Felix and Ko-Ko (and Chaplin) represented a beleaguered immigrant-naif comedy, Daffy and Sylvester the Cat and, above all, Bugs Bunny are celebrations of unashamed American ingenuity. It’s a kind of second-generation-immigrant comedy, where wheedling and scheming are admired, very much like Phil Silver’s later Sgt. Bilko. Bugs isn’t mean, but he’s always ready to protect himself from the Elmer Fudds of the world with his own cleverness. In the Second World War, Bugs became every put-upon G.I.’s totem and hero. Indeed, what’s demonstrated by the recirculation of those few training films—directed by, among others, Chuck Jones and voiced by Mel Blanc—is that the voice of the Everyman, Private Snafe, is indistinguishable from Bug’s.

The embodiment of the mythic “trickster” figure in a rabbit or hare is, for reasons buried deep in the human psyche (or perhaps only in the bunny’s fertile nature), oddly ancient and universal, running from Japan to Africa and into American indigenous culture. There’s a South African rabbit-trickster story in which the rabbit, having been instructed by the moon to share the certainty of resurrection with all creation, says, instead, “Like as I die and do not rise again, so you shall also die and not rise again.” The moon, enraged, hits him right in the kisser and splits his lip. It’s a pure Bugs moment. You can hear him saying the offending line, carrot like a cigar in hand. (If Bugs is the ideal trickster, Wile E. represents the necessary folk-tale adjunct, the trickster tricked, excessive predatory ingenuity denied by his prey’s naïve energy.)

The Warner Bros. comedy is not gentle but hard-edged and, to an unusual degree, bundled around the soundtrack. Not only did Mel Blanc’s voice characterization often drive the cartoons; the scores, usually supervised by the Disney refugee Carl Stalling—and played by the in-house fifty-piece orchestra—were dense with musical puns and jests. Every moment had its music, and many of those moments were as much allusive as illustrative, with old pop songs momentarily summoned to accent the action.

As a codicil to the Warner Bros. tale of independence rewarded, Mitenbuler relates the slightly later story of U.P.A., the left-leaning animation studio that brought a short-lived stylistic renaissance to cartooning in the fifties, with an unapologetically anti-naturalistic, clean and lean style, and cool jazz background music. Some of the U.P.A. team, including the director John Hubley, who helped create Mr. Magoo, were blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, but the studio went on to produce a genuine full-length animated classic, “Mister Magoo’s Christmas Carol” (1962). It included a first-class song score by two Broadway A-listers, Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, which, once heard, is hard to forget.

Do we live at the end of the era of two-dimensional animation? Though the fans of the form persuasively reassure us of the beauties of new classically animated works—including those by Studio Ghibli, in Tokyo, and Cartoon Saloon, in Kilkenny—they will strike the average parent searching for cartoons to share like warmly glowing Edison bulbs in a sharp-lit L.E.D. era. The aesthetic-minded new animators still float on McCay’s waves, but most of the old-guard Hollywood animation units now seem to be listing like his Lusitania.

The larger story of the intersection of commerce and the popular arts, within which this history sits, is not a wholly negative one, but it does have a specific shape. High moments in popular art begin when no one has cracked the commercial code sufficiently to know what will work—will an Einstein cartoon take off?—and a proliferation of possibilities becomes available, including, above all, the possibility of open-ended, unkempt emotion. This proliferation of possibilities happened with pop music in the late sixties, with American film in the early seventies, with long-form television in the first decade of this century. A receptive audience, a plurality of artists, and the basic commercial uncertainty about what works or what can be made to work, and, presto, you get “Sgt. Pepper” and “The Godfather”; then someone cracks the code of commerce, and you get “Frampton Comes Alive!” and “Smokey and the Bandit.”

The good stuff never disappears, but it does subside. We are living through a moment of subsidence now. Flexibility of form meets the certainties of commerce. Damned up, the flow of creative energy retreats, re-forms, finds a new opening, and starts to flow again. The Fleischers were not wrong about this. All art aspires to the condition of music, a wise man said once, and perhaps all cultural history aspires to the condition of a cartoon: a seeming fluidity of movement, made up of countless small stops and starts. ♦
When asked to describe the circumstances of her birth, the Surrealist painter and writer Leonora Carrington liked to tell people that she had not been born; she had been made. One melancholy day, her mother, bloated by chocolate truffles, oyster purée, and cold pheasant, feeling fat and listless and undesirable, had lain on top of a machine. The machine was a marvellous contraption, designed to extract hundreds of gallons of semen from animals—pigs, cockerels, stallions, urchins, bats, ducks—and, one can imagine, bring its user to the most spectacular orgasm, turning her whole sad, sick being inside out and upside down. From this communion of human, animal, and machine, Leonora was conceived. When she emerged, on April 6, 1917, England shook.

The success of a creation story hangs on how richly it seeds the life to come. Carrington’s encompasses all the elements of her life and her art. There is her decadence and indelicate sense of fancy; her fascination with animals and with bodies, both otherworldly and profane. Above all, there is her high-spirited, baroque sense of humor, mating the artificial to the natural, and recalling Henri Bergson’s claim that the essence of comedy is the image of “something mechanical encrusted upon the living.” Her humor and its offspring—two novels, a memoir, a delightfully macabre collection of stories, along with hundreds of paintings, sculptures, and objects—have been unearthed on several occasions since her death, in 2011. Each time her work is reborn, it seems more prescient, her comedy more finely tuned to our growing consciousness of the nonhuman world and the forces that inhabit it.

In Carrington’s creation story, the butt of the joke is her true origins, an incurably repressive Anglo-Irish upbringing, which she fled in 1937. She settled first in France, and then, when the Nazis descended, Madrid, New York, and Mexico City, where she spent the rest of her life. She never again saw her father, a Lancashire mill owner who, in her twenties, had her committed to a mental institution. “Of the two, I was far more afraid of my father than I was of Hitler,” she claimed. She seldom visited her mother, an able, sympathetic woman, more mesmerized by the whirligig of the London scene than by art or literature. “The Debutante,” a story Carrington wrote just after leaving home, shows the savagery she wrought from her family’s money and good English manners. A girl befriends a hyena at the zoo, teaches it to speak, and persuades it to take her place at a ball. The hyena attends wearing the face of the girl’s maid, killed and eaten as part of its evening toilette.

“Nurse! Do let’s pretend that I’m a hungry hyena, and you’re a bone,” Lewis Carroll’s Alice shouts, in “Through the Looking Glass.” Alice is too young to imagine her game of make-believe literalized as gruesome social satire, but Carrington, a devoted reader of Carroll and Jonathan Swift, certainly could. The Cheshire Cat and the Houyhnhnms must have taught her that comedy and critique both work by casting the familiar aspects of life in new, doubtful guises. Which is more artificial, she asks: dressing a hyena as a human or a human as a woman? What is the difference between a hyena and a human? Shouldn’t the two be allies in a planetary war against débutante balls, against kings and queens and empires, against the cannibalizing machinery of capital, which takes the domination of women and nature as its origin point?

Surrealist art, with its convulsive, outlandish juxtapositions, showed Carrington how to discern the folly of the humans she knew. It also invited her to cavort with nonhuman creatures, drawing on their beauty and suffering to make tame ideas about character and plot more porous, elastic, and gloriously unhinged. The distinctions between human and
animal, animal and machine, flicker in and out of focus in her early stories, but the fiction she wrote in the nineteen-fifties and sixties dissolves them lavishly. Here we find several barnyards’ worth of chimeras, extravagant beings who commune with all manner of “mechanical artifacts.” They are bearers of utopian hopes and victims of threats from ordinary humans. Consider her story “As They Rode Along the Edge,” a romance featuring Virginia Fur, not quite woman, not quite cat, with “bats and moths imprisoned” in her hair and a blind nightingale lodged in her throat. Her lover, Iglame the Boar, woos her in “a wig made of squirrels’ tails.” Their children are seven little boars conceived under “a mountain of cats.” Virginia boils and eats them all but one of the children, after men hunt and kill their father.

In Carrington’s writing, the critic Janet Lyon has observed, the appearance of an ordinary human always feels like an aberration, a harbinger of death. Ordinary humans, when confronted with Carrington’s creatures, brandish their superior rationality and industry. Sometimes they press the point with guns, other times with atomic bombs, as in her novel “They Rode Along the Edge,” in which a hyena with a bird cawing between his legs—his alter ego, a faceless woman holds a lopped-off head in her hand. Her most notable features are her stony, round, engorged teats and a woman with ferocious hair and a pale, unalarmed face stare out at the viewer. But amid the painting, the drinking, the talk and the sex, the wind blew foul and fair. For one thing, the Nazis were drawing near. For another, Ernst was married, more established, selfish, clingy, and demanding. The Nazis were drawing near. For another, Ernst was married, more established, selfish, clingy, and demanding.

The story of Carrington’s liberation from the human world is the subject of her memoir, “Down Below” (1944). The book opens by summoning its reader:

Exactly three years ago, I was interned in Dr. Morales’s sanatorium in Santander, Spain, Dr. Pardo, of Madrid, and the British Consul having pronounced me incurably insane. Since I fortuitously met you, whom I consider the most clear-sighted of all, I began gathering a week ago the threads which might have led me across the initial border of Knowledge. I must live through that experience all over again, because, by doing so, I believe that I may be of use to you, just as I believe that you will be of help in my journey beyond that frontier by keeping me lucid and by enabling me to put on and to take off at will the mask which will be my shield against the hostility of Conformism.

Who could turn down this flattering invitation? You will serve as her accomplice, as well as her pupil—the debutante to her masked hyena. Together, you form one of her conjoined beings: the narrator who weaves the story of her life; the reader who lets herself be ensnared by it.

“Down Below” imagines its narrator and its readers journeying toward Knowledge as a collective entity, yet the circumstances leading up to its writing were singular and bizarre. They began with Carrington’s adolescent rebellions. Her father sent her to a convent school in 1930; the nuns sent her back. In 1936, her mother sent her to study art in London, where she fell in with the Surrealists. They worshipped her as a muse, a witch—not the old and ugly kind, André Breton explained, but an enchantress with “a smooth, mocking gaze.” This reputation still clings to her, unlike the bedsheets she is said to have worn to parties. Even her well-intentioned biographer Joanna Moorhead writes with bewitched reverence of the teen-age Leonora, “the beautiful, sparky young woman with her dark eyes, crimson lips, and cascade of raven curls” destined to meet the German Surrealist Max Ernst, twenty-six years older than her, and soon to anoint her his femme-enfant. Her family had wrongheadedly nicknamed her Prim. He renamed her the Bride of the Wind.

How far would the wind carry its young bride? Across the Channel, to a small stone farmhouse in Saint-Martin-d’Arèche, in the Rhône Valley, which the couple bought in 1938. They painted its interior with fish and lizard-like creatures, women turning into horses, and a blood-red unicorn. They sculpted a mermaid for the terrace, bought two peacocks to roam the yard, and mounted a bas-relief on the house’s façade. Its two figures still stand. A man in robes, with a bird cawing between his legs—this was Loplop, Ernst’s alter ego. Next to him, a faceless woman holds a lopped-off head in her hand. Her most notable features are her stony, round, vigorously protruding breasts.

Here Carrington completed her first major painting, “Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse),” in which a hyena with engorged teats and a woman with ferocious hair and a pale, unalarmed face stare out at the viewer. But amid the painting, the drinking, the talk and the sex, the wind blew foul and fair. For one thing, the Nazis were drawing near. For another, Ernst was married, more established, selfish, clingy, and demanding.

“I wanted this to work, too, James, but it’s time we accepted it—I am entirely grass, and you are clearly some part of the cat’s face.”
One wonders if she started to see their relationship the way that his patron Peggy Guggenheim did: “Like Nell and her grandfather in ‘The Old Curiosity Shop.’” One also wonders if Carrington, eying the bas-relief, felt paralyzed by the way male Surrealists had treated women as artificial beings—their bodies manipulable, their spirits elusive. Salvador Dali, in his essay “The New Colors of Spectral Sex Appeal” (1934), had prophesied that the sexual attractiveness of modern woman would derive from “the disarticulation and distortion of her anatomy.”

“New and uncomfortable anatomical parts—artificial ones—will be used to accentuate the atmospheric feeling of a breast, buttock, or heel,” he wrote, only half-joking. She would appear a luminous paradox, animate and inanimate, carnal and ghostly; perfect for being desired and for being painted but not for creating an art of her own.

Against this background, “Down Below” opens with Ernst’s internment by the French as an undesirable foreigner, after the outbreak of war, in 1939. His imprisonment, we learn, jump-started a ritual of purgation. Carrington spent twenty-four hours drinking orange-blossom water to induce vomiting. Then she took a nap and reconciled herself to his absence. For three weeks, she ate sparsingly, sunbathed, tended potatoes in the garden, and ignored the German troops thronging the village. She wondered if her attitude “betrayed an unconscious desire to get rid for the second time of my father: Max, whom I had to eliminate if I wanted to live,” she wrote, planning to sell up and drive to Spain. The reader who counts the threads of the story—a purified heroine, her calling to vanquish an undesirable man, a journey through a mysterious land—knows that this is no lurid memoir of psychosis and political chaos. It is a quest narrative, designed to give brisk expression to Carrington’s desire for a freer world.

Like all quests, this one had its obstacles. The first turned out to be her body, prized and painted by the Surrealists. Previously dismantled into its erotic components—a torso in a photograph, a breast on a wall—it began to integrate with everything around it. “Jammed!” Carrington proclaimed when the car taking her to Spain broke down. “I was the car. The car had jammed on account of me, because I, too, was jammed between Saint-Martin and Spain.” In Andorra, she could only scuttle like a crab: “an attempt at climbing stairs would again bring about a ‘jam.’” The modernist arthropod—Kafka’s bug, or Eliot’s Prufrock, longing to be “a pair of ragged claws”—is a well-worn trope of alienation and stasis, but for Carrington it sparked a breakthrough. Part car, part crab, part Carrington, she hit on the same revelation that all her fiction would offer: her body had only ever been a poorly crafted artifice, caging her spirit and barring the entry of others.

And so a more profound journey beckoned, not the expulsion of a single man—Ernst is forgotten by the narrator—but her reincarnation as a multiple and quixotic being: “an androgyne, the Moon, the Holy Ghost, a gypsy, an acrobat, Leonora Carrington, and a woman,” she wrote. And a more terrible obstacle loomed. For her revelation, she was institutionalized, made “a prisoner in a sanatorium full of nuns,” and later injected with Cardiazol, stripped, and strapped to a bed. She had a series of visions in which all the nuns and doctors, all of history, religion, and nature were contained in her, and she was the world. Freeing herself would free the cosmos, “stop the war and liberate the world, which was ‘jammed’ like me,” she had reasoned. The place where will permeated all matter, where the boundaries between bodies and beings dissolved, was not Spain but what she called “Down Below.” “I would go Down Below, as the third person of the Trinity,” she announced. The title of the book named her true destination, her utopia.

This, at least, is what we are led to believe. The reader, like any dutiful sidekick, awaits further instructions to go Down Below. Instead, Carrington’s madness lifts, and upon her release she journeys from Madrid to Lisbon to New York. The quest is aborted, utopia abandoned, the threads of the story snapped before they can be knotted together. Why, the disappointed reader wonders, has the heroine failed to complete her quest? The epilogue to “Down Below” suggests that, in life, no one was there to help convert Carrington’s madness into a fully realized world. The artistic community of European Surrealism was now scattered, confined. Her surreal experience of psychiatric institutionalization was mirrored by Surrealism’s institutionalization in New York’s art market—a complicity with wealth depressingly symbolized by Ernst’s marriage to Peggy Guggenheim, in 1942. “Surrealism is no longer considered modern today,” a character in “The Hearing Trumpet” laments. “Even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte’s famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room.”
lighthouse, a circus tent, a toadstool, a cuckoo clock. The discovery of a document detailing the occult activities of an old abbess suddenly launches us on a grail quest. It summons to Marian’s side not Galahad but the winged animals and white goddesses of the Celtic and Old English traditions.

Carrington’s heroine succeeds because she is matched by a narrative form as chimerical as she is—not the short story or the memoir but the novel. “The Hearing Trumpet” reads like a spectacular reassemblage of old and new genres, the campy, illegitimate offspring of Margaret Cavendish’s romances and Robert Graves’s histories, with Thomas Pynchon’s riotous paranoia spliced in to keep it limber and receptive to the political anxieties of its moment. The search for the grail is undertaken after the “dreadful atom bomb” has inaugurated another Ice Age, killing nearly all humans and destroying their modern infrastructure. The Cold War has turned the world, well, cold. Carrington’s comedy of literalization asks us how a metaphor has become a terrible reality. A conversation between Marian and Carmella provides an answer:

“It is impossible to understand how millions and millions of people all obey a sickly collection of gentlemen that call themselves ‘Government!’ The world, I expect, frightens people. It is a form of planetary hypnosis, and very unhealthy.”

“It has been going on for years,” I said.

“And it only occurred to relatively few to disobey and make what they call revolutions. If they won their revolutions, which they occasionally did, they made more governments, sometimes more cruel and stupid than the last.”

“Men are very difficult to understand,” said Carmella. “Let’s hope they all freeze to death.”

The women have no use for frozen institutions. What they seek are living communities for all creatures, forged not through domination and cruelty but through care and mutual assistance. The community that the novel creates is what distinguishes “The Hearing Trumpet” as a delicious triumph of world-making. Unlike Leonora in “Down Below,” Marian is not alone in her fight against Conformism. Her side-kicks are not her spectral readers but a gathering of elderly women, animals, and spirits, growing ever more crowded and boisterous as the novel shuffles them to their end. In its climax, Marian leaps into a cauldron of meat broth and, in an act of Eucharistic vooodoo, drinks herself, lightly seasoned with salt and peppercorns. Dissolving like a bouillon cube, she finds her brothy spirit permeating the other women, who keep her from spilling all over the place. Together, they forage mushrooms, raise goats, conjure bees whose honey they lick from their bodies, and make spinning wheels. They hope to people the frozen earth with “cats, werewolves, bees, and goats”—an “improvement on humanity,” Marian declares.

For all the outlandishness of the novel’s action, there is something supremely practical about its tone, as if it were well within our power to step into its looking-glass world—a world where Carrington’s recombinant art and utopian imagination are not extraordinary at all but simple facts of life. Perhaps what made the novel’s surreal ending conceivable was the environment in which it was produced, the artistic community that formed around Carrington in Mexico City. She arrived there in 1942, and found a city full of socialists and communists in exile, its arts scene presided over by the suspicious luminaries of Mexican Muralism. (Frida Kahlo apparently called Carrington and her circle “those European bitches.”) She married the Hungarian photographer Chiki Weisz, had two children, and created a new “Surreal Family,” anchored by two friends, the photographer Kati Horna and the painter Remedios Varo. The family was a matriarchy, committed to dissolving the boundaries between the daily work of art and the daily work of care—a feminist project more enduring and surreal than any single romance or school of painting.

For the next several decades, the family experimented with traditional craftsmanship. Carrington’s studio was “a combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel, and junk-store,” her patron Edward James observed, impressed by the magic she could wring out of domesticity. Atop a table one might spy a cot for the other women, who keep her from spilling all over the place. Together, they forage mushrooms, raise goats, conjure bees whose honey they lick from their bodies, and make spinning wheels. They hope to people the frozen earth with “cats, werewolves, bees, and goats”—an “improvement on humanity,” Marian declares.

Underneath all this shimmering play runs a deep vein of vulnerability. “I am an old lady who has lived through a lot and I have changed,” Carrington wrote to a friend in 1945. She was only twenty-eight. She did not have to be elderly to feel old—isolated, estranged from her body, her consciousness dispersed. She was soon to be a new mother in a foreign country, never to live in her homeland again. She had entered early retirement, settling into her self-fashioned assisted-living facility. After her younger son, Pablo, was born, in 1947, Carrington wrote to the art dealer Pierre Matisse explaining why she would not attend her solo show at his gallery in New York: “I haven’t been out of these four walls for about 2 years & have become so intimidated by the outside world that I might have grown a hare-lip, a long grey beard & three cauliflower ears, bow legs, a hump, gall stones & cross eyes.”

Some might see this self-imposed lockdown as a constraint born from her insecurity, but it contained the conditions of her liberation. The gray beard would reappear on her heroine Marian, as would her mistrust of institutional consecration. Both are marks of wisdom, proof of Carrington’s faith that the spirit of a community, where art is truly lived and made, can walk through walls. Whether she was young or old, locked up or locked down, Carrington summoned unseen forces to come and make a lonely world feel bigger. “The Hearing Trumpet” prophesied the rest of her life, and she was content with it. She made her art, loved her friends and children deeply, had no interest in publicity, rarely offered explanations of her work, and never wrote another novel. And why would she? “The Hearing Trumpet” contained the utopia she imagined, and the world she knew.
Nearly seven years ago, a shaggy singer with a shy smile introduced himself to America. “My name is Morgan Wallen, I’m twenty years old, I’m from Knoxville, Tennessee, and I’m currently a landscaper,” he said. He was standing on a stage in Los Angeles, competing for a spot on “The Voice,” one of those reality shows in which established stars offer aspiring ones a chance to discover, first hand, just how heartbreaking the music industry can be. He was wearing a tie and a cardigan, with shoulder-length hair and most of a beard, and he explained that his promising baseball career had been ended, during his senior year in high school, by a debilitating injury to his ulnar collateral ligament. “I’m just a normal small-town kid, and I really don’t have a clue how to get into music—other than this,” he said.

Wallen had never been on an airplane until he flew to L.A. for the taping, and he was unsure what kind of singer he wanted to be. He auditioned with a husky version of “Collide,” an earnest ballad from the two-thousands, which impressed Shakira, one of the celebrity judges. “Your voice is unique—it has this raspy tone, gritty sound to it,” she said. “It’s as manly as it gets.” Even so, Wallen was eliminated a month later, and he returned to Tennessee with a slightly higher profile, a few industry connections, and a newfound awareness that he had what many Californians considered a thick Southern accent. “They’d be, like, Where are you from?” he recalls. He began thinking about that question, too.

These days, Wallen is a country-music star. His signature hit, “Whiskey Glasses,” is a perfectly constructed ode to a woman and a drink, lost and found, respectively: “I’m a need some whiskey glasses/Cause I don’t wanna see the truth.” According to Billboard, it was the top country-radio song of 2019. The music video depicts a fictionalized version of the makeover that Wallen underwent after “The Voice.” He rips off the sleeves of a plaid flannel shirt and shaves the sides of his long hair, transforming himself into an Everyman rock star: Bruce Springsteen meets Larry the Cable Guy, crowned with a glorious mullet. Through this process, Wallen became not just a singer but a character—and, in a development that seems to have surprised many Nashville professionals, a sex symbol, beloved by an army of fans who appear to be disproportionately female and thirsty. An innocuous photograph of him leaning against a truck recently drew nearly half a million likes on Instagram, and almost ten thousand comments, including a prayerful declaration from a young mother in South Carolina: “Lord have mercy im bout to bust.”

Wallen was alarmed when the live-music industry shut down in March, but 2020 has turned out to be the best year of his career. A new single helped him maintain his radio ubiquity, and his homebound fans made him a TikTok favorite, reacting to snippets of songs and recording their own versions. Some non-country listeners first heard about Wallen in the beginning of October, when “Saturday Night Live” announced that he would be the musical guest on an upcoming episode. Many more of them heard about him a few days later, when the show announced that Wallen’s appearance had been cancelled because of video footage that was circulating, on TikTok (naturally), showing him at an Alabama bar the previous weekend, sharing kisses—and, for all anyone knew, virions—with at least two different women. Wallen acknowledged his mistake in a downbeat but charming two-minute video, apologizing for
what he called “short-sighted” behavior and signalling a temporary withdrawal from the spotlight. “It may be a second before you hear from me, for a while,” he said.

He wasn’t gone long. In early December, Wallen made it to “S.N.L.,” performing a couple of songs and starring in a sketch in which he reenacted his fateful trip to that Alabama bar and begged forgiveness, singing, “I thank you in advance / For giving this poor Southern boy a second Yankee chance.” On Twitter, viewers debated his hair, his hygiene, and his general persona. “Go to any Circle K in Indiana and you’ll find yourself a Morgan Wallen,” one user wrote. But it is not clear that Wallen would consider this an insult. On January 8th, he will release “Dangerous: The Double Album” (“Big Loud”), which takes pains to reassure listeners that he is still a small-town guy, albeit one with a marvellously grainy voice and a knack for singing clever songs that are sometimes wistful, sometimes rowdy, and almost always boozy—in this way, at least, he is a country traditionalist. One of the advantages of his sleeveless-shirt image is that it provides him occasional opportunities to upend listeners’ expectations. “Ain’t it strange the things you keep tucked in your heart,” he murmurs, near the end of one song. And this unexpectedly philosophical flourish helps draw out the double meaning in the next line, which suggests personal growth while also recapitulating the excuse that he must have offered to “Saturday Night Live” executives, not long ago: “I found myself in this bar.”

Wallen grew up in Sneedville, Tennessee, an isolated town in a valley near the Virginia border, where his father was for a time the pastor of the local Southern Baptist church. Wallen took classical-violin lessons as a boy, but by the time his family settled in Knoxville, when he was in high school, he was listening to unpretentious radio-friendly rock bands like Breaking Benjamin and Nickelback. In Wallen’s account, his embrace of country music was less a stylistic choice than a cultural imperative. “It may not have been the biggest influence in my life, as far as musically,” he says. “But once I started writing songs, it just sounded country. And I was, like, well, I guess I’ll sing country music, because this is the life I know.”

After “The Voice,” Wallen moved to Nashville, where he found a like-minded producer: Joey Moi, known for his work with Nickelback, who had reinvented himself as a country hitmaker. Wallen was streamlining his singing style, excising bluesy flourishes to arrive at a mellow but muscular country-rock hybrid. “He had no idea how good he was,” Moi recalls. Wallen’s first album, “If I Know Me,” from 2018, started with a likable lead single, “The Way I Talk,” which stalled at No. 30 on the country-radio chart—an ominous sign for a new singer. But then came a trio of No. 1 country hits, helped by a collaboration with another Moi client, the country duo Florida Georgia Line, and by that haircut, a staple of nineties country fashion that had come to seem stylishly retro. (One of the most famous mullets belonged to Billy Ray Cyrus, whose daughter Miley has lately contributed to their revival.) “If I Know Me” reached No. 1 on the Billboard country-album chart in August, more than two years after it was released. By then, Wallen had a new song heading up the country charts, “More Than My Hometown,” an anthem of civic pride that is also, inevitably, a love story. He underenunciates, using his drawl to make the wordy verses sound casual: “I ain’t the runaway kind, I can’t change that / My heart’s stuck in these streets, like the train tracks / City sky ain’t the same black.” And in the chorus he makes his choice, declaring, over classic-rock guitar, “I guess I’ll see you around / ‘Cause I can’t love you more than my hometown.”

Wallen made his first album in a rush, squeezing recording sessions into a ten-day window between gigs. This year, like many people, he found himself with more free time, and that explains why “Dangerous” contains thirty songs. For tradition’s sake, the album is split into two “sides,” the first of which is gentler and better, starting with a lovestruck Tennessee boy in a “sunburnt Silverado,” reminiscing about a beachside fling. Near the end comes “More Than My Hometown,” as well as “7 Summers,” which fans first heard in April, when Wallen uploaded part of a demo to Instagram. “7 Summers” uses a pair of major-seventh chords to evoke the breezy sound of Fleetwood Mac and the bittersweet memory of an old flame. “We thought we were cutting this deep cut,” Moi says. But Wallen’s fans grew obsessed, posting and reposting the snippet and begging him to release the final version. When he eventually did, a few months later, they pushed it to No. 6 on the Billboard Hot 100, thereby making reality-television history. “The Voice” recently concluded its nineteenth season, and Wallen is the only contestant ever to score a Top 10 hit.

On the second half of “Dangerous,” Wallen reminds listeners who he is and where he’s from. This is something that mainstream country singers are obliged to do, especially the men, who are expected to inject new life into familiar lines about pickup trucks and women in cutoff jeans. Not all of Wallen’s efforts in this regard are up to his usual standards, especially during a four-song stretch that includes “Somethin’ Country” and “Country Ass Shit” and “Whatcha Think of Country Now.” (It would not be a surprise to learn that one or more of these compositions began with a songwriter losing a bet.) But more often he establishes his bona fides with a wink, as in “Blame It on Me,” a mock apology to a woman who “goes country” for him, and has a hard time going back. Perhaps it is no coincidence that “Blame It on Me,” with its evocation of cultural authenticity, is actually a musical hybrid: a tidy pop song, partly propelled by a drum machine. Since the twenty-tens, country singers have grown increasingly adept at borrowing from contemporary hip-hop and R. & B., and Wallen sometimes sings with a rapper’s sense of rhythm, even as he defines himself against urban sounds and urban life. “Beer don’t taste half as good in the city,” he sings. “Beer don’t buzz with that hip-hop, cuz / But it damn sure does with a little Nitty Gritty.” Although he is wrong about beer, he is surely right that many of his listeners like to think of him as one of their own—loyal to a country community that harbors, even now, mixed feelings about the cultural dominance of hip-hop.

When Wallen found out that “Saturday Night Live” had rescinded its initial invitation, in October, he was sitting in a hotel room in midtown Manhattan, getting ready for rehearsal. As he processed the news, a member of his management team ordered him a steak din-
ner from a nearby restaurant, which he ate in his room before flying back to Tennessee. This month, when he returned to New York for his second chance, he sounded excited to be on the show, though he didn’t pretend to be a regular viewer. “I think this is a huge opportunity for me to hopefully give ‘em a good first impression,” he said, from a different room in the same Manhattan hotel. This time, he promised not to do anything to violate quarantine protocol. (TMZ cameras spotted him on his way to the set—dressed, counterproductively, in a camouflage sweatshirt.) Although his appearance went smoothly, it also illustrated how wide a gap remains between the media mainstream and the country mainstream. During Wallen’s sketch, he bantered cheerfully with Jason Bateman, the host, and Bowen Yang, a cast member, who played versions of Wallen from the future, sent back in time to stop him from partying away his big chance at stardom; both actors did notably inexact impressions of his accent. But during his final performance Wallen seemed defiant, as if he weren’t sure that he liked being the butt of all these New York jokes. “Call it cliché, but hey, just take it from me / It’s still goin’ down out in the country,” he sneered, using hip-hop slang to convey a sentiment as old as country music itself.

In March, not long after the lockdown began, a woman named Priscilla Block appeared on TikTok, brandishing a glass of wine and singing an updated version of “Whiskey Glasses.” Instead of “I just wanna sip ’til the pain wears off,” Block sang, “I just wanna sip until the quarantine’s done.” Both her voice and her timing were impressive, and her cover was played millions of times. Block was twenty-four, and had been living in Nashville, performing in local bars for tip money. With the bars closed, she dedicated herself to TikTok, often posting multiple videos in a day: she wielded a makeup brush like a microphone, recorded sing-alongs from her car, and posted pleas for Wallen to release more music. (She wants it known that she was a fan even before his makeover, not that she objected to it. “The mullet just made it better, honey,” she says. “I love the mullet.”) Soon Block began sharing snippets of her own work: first a couple of playful songs, “P.M.S.” and “Thick Thighs,” and then, this summer, “Just About Over You,” a well-crafted lament that propelled her out of the TikTok underground and into the country mainstream. She signed a major-label deal in September.

During this year’s lockdown, TikTok has emerged as a new way for country singers to get noticed, much the way TV singing competitions did a couple of decades before. FM radio, not television or social media, still defines the country mainstream, but sometimes it scrambles to keep pace. “7 Summers” was, fittingly, a summer hit on the Hot 100, which includes data from streaming services. But it is only now starting to ascend the country airplay chart. “Dangerous,” with its thirty songs, seems designed to keep radio stations busy well into the post-pandemic era.

The album includes plenty of party songs—so many, in fact, that some of Wallen’s fans may worry about him. (In May, Wallen was arrested, but not prosecuted, for public intoxication and disorderly conduct after an incident at a Nashville bar owned by a local celebrity who turned out to be sympathetic: Kid Rock.) Wallen has said that he wants to change his habits for the sake of his son, who was born in July. And tucked near the end of the album’s first half is his version of “Cover Me Up,” by the celebrated singer-songwriter Jason Isbell. The lyrics tell the story of a man recuperating from a bender, or a lifetime of benders, surrendering to love and, maybe, sobriety; Isbell’s original is quavering and uncertain, as if he were still learning to believe what he sings. Wallen’s interpretation, which has been streamed nearly a hundred million times on Spotify, is brawnier and perhaps more suggestive. “Girl, leave your boots by the bed, we ain’t leavin’ this room,” he sings, in a voice that justifies the enthusiasm of both Shakira and a certain mother in South Carolina. Wallen’s record company hasn’t decided whether to make it a single and try to persuade radio stations to play it. Isbell’s songs are not typically heard on country radio—but these days just about anything Wallen sings sounds like a potential country hit.
AN early episode of the fourth season of “Big Mouth,” now streaming on Netflix, opens with the show’s protagonists, Andrew Glouberman and Nick Birch, embarking on their first day of eighth grade. “Look at us, growing up,” Nick (voiced by Nick Kroll) says. “Not like Bart Simpson. That yellow schmuck has been in fourth grade for, like, thirty years.” A clever but heartfelt cartoon that is bursting with pop-cultural references and is popular with adult viewers, “Big Mouth” owes more than a little to “The Simpsons.” (Even the use of “schmuck” is evocative of Krusty the Clown.) Still, Nick’s comment identifies the uniqueness of this series, created by Kroll, Andrew Goldberg, Mark Levin, and Jennifer Flackett. By allowing its characters to age—and by focusing in on them, to an almost painful degree, as they do so—“Big Mouth” can feel more akin to live-action TV than it does to cartoons such as “South Park” and “Bob’s Burgers,” which have used animation to keep their protagonists static over the course of many seasons, as if preserved in amber.

“I’m going through changes,” Charles Bradley sings in the show’s opening theme. (The tune was originated by Black Sabbath, that band of hormonal lads from Birmingham.) Since 2017, when the first season aired, “Big Mouth” has depicted the riotous, often alarming transformations that puberty wreaks on the young. The characters, who, back then, were seventh graders, encountered new growths and protrusions (hard-ons, pubic hair, boobs), distressing secretions (sweat, semen, blood), and the nutso psychological effects these bodily changes incur. One of the show’s strong suits is its portrayal of the capricious ways in which youthful sexuality can express itself: Jay (Jason Mantzoukas), a greasy but sympathetic classmate of Andrew and Nick’s, discovers that he is bisexual by humping a “boy” pillow as well as a “girl” pillow; Andrew (John Mulaney), a bespectacled, mustachioed ball of neuroses, develops a crush on his cousin and, although he is ashamed, proceeds to send her a dick pic; the lovable, bucktoothed nerd Missy (Jenny Slate) masturbates with her childhood Glo Worm and refers to the act as her “worm dance.”

The show’s anarchic spirit is reflected in its graphic, borderline grotesque style of animation, which enables it to depict aspects of pubescent sexuality that might otherwise offend or disturb. (Goldberg was a longtime writer on “Family Guy,” an adult cartoon that is like “Big Mouth”’s coarse, alcoholic uncle.) The kids’ urges and fears are represented by a slew of fantastical creatures: there are shaggy, wisecracking “hormone monsters”; a finger-wagging “shame wizard”; a silk-en-voiced “depression kitty”; and, as of this season, a jumpy “anxiety mosquito” named Tito (Maria Bamford). Unsurprisingly, Tito is a real bummer. “Their penises are thick hairy hogs and yours is a bald little piglet,” he tells Nick, a late bloomer, as the boy is getting ready to take a shower at summer camp.

The first three episodes of the fourth season, which take place at the camp, are some of the funniest TV I’ve watched in a while. There’s a new character named Milk (Emily Altman), a mouth-breathing whiner who can’t stop bringing up obscure factoids, seemingly apropos of nothing (“My dad’s friend Bob Reedy says there’s no such thing as choice, only destiny”). He is a familiar prototype: the uppity dork who is so annoying that even the softer-hearted kids don’t feel sorry for him. “Milk, your dick is so weird. I can see the veins in your balls,” a bunkmate tells him. “During the Renaissance, scrotas such as mine were considered a delicacy,” Milk responds air-
ily. Perhaps nothing embodies the “Big Mouth” formula better than this exchange: gross, hilarious, weird, precise.

A TV show can have growing pains, too. Andrew and Nick are the alter egos of Goldberg and Kroll, who’ve been real-life best friends since childhood, and, early on, the series hewed closely to their adolescent milieu: upper-middle-class, white, straight Jews from Westchester. (In Season 1, the “Great Women”-themed bat mitzvah of Nick and Andrew’s sardonic friend Jessi—voiced by Jessi Klein—has an Anne Frank table.) Season by season, “Big Mouth” has had to figure out, in tandem with the rolling cultural and political realities of the past few years, how to develop and fine-tune its world alongside its characters.

In Season 2, a gay classmate, Matthew (Andrew Rannells), and a Latina one, Gina (Gina Rodriguez), got more airtime; in Season 3, a new student named Ali (Ali Wong) introduced herself as pansexual. “If you’re bisexual, you like tacos and burritos,” she said. “But I’m saying I like tacos and burritos, and I could be into a taco that was born a burrito, or a burrito that is transitioning into a taco.” This flippant distinction, which seemingly suggested that bisexuals could not be attracted to transgender and nonbinary people, led to an outcry online. (Goldberg apologized on Twitter.) This summer, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, Jenny Slate, who is white and Jewish, announced that she would no longer voice Missy, a character with a Black father and a white, Jewish mother, because “represent a biracial character fully?—by.categories, though useful as shorthand, can be tricky.

When Missy’s mother expresses doubts about whether her daughter’s cornrows are “manageable,” Missy blows up. “Stop stealing our men!” she yells, in a hilarious, shocking moment that turns heartrending when she gasps, through tears, “I just really wanted to show you my new hair.” Later, in a Halloween-themed episode, Missy reaches a détente with her fragmented self and kisses her refracted reflections in a haunted house’s broken mirror—a sweet reimagining of a sequence from Jordan Peele’s horror movie “Us.” In this moment, her voice changes from Slate’s to Edebiri’s. “There I am,” she says, triumphantly. “I’m all of these Missys.”

 believed to see “Big Mouth” double down on that idea. One of my favorite gags was Andrew’s obsession with Jessi’s new boyfriend, Michaelangelo. Andrew, who is straight, swoons over the dreamy Brit, but this is treated as unremarkable; it is just one more facet of Andrew’s horniness. A more serious arc deals with Natalie, a trans camper. Jessi is upset when Natalie starts bunking with the girls—not because Jessi is transphobic but because last summer Natalie, who had not yet transitioned and was still known as Gabe, from the boys’ cabin, teased Jessi mercilessly, calling her “fire crotch.”

The show also confronts questions that were raised by Slate’s statement—Who should be able to give voice to Black characters? What would it look like to represent a biracial character fully?—by turning them into plot points. This season, Missy, who has grown up in a “post-racial household,” grapples with both her burgeoning womanhood and her evolving racial identity. “N-word alert!” she blurs out nervously, when visiting her older, cooler cousins, Quinta and Lena (Quinta Brunson and Lena Waithe). The cousins, who tell Missy that her parents haven’t let her be Black, take her to get her hair braided (“What shampoo do you use?” “Well, Tom’s of Maine, of course!”) and encourage her to buy new clothes, which she does—but only after bidding a weepy farewell to the overalls she has worn for the past three seasons.

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WHAT ARE ARTISTS FOR?

The Constructivists, at MOMA.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Your first impression of “Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented, 1918–1939,” a vast and exciting show, at the Museum of Modern Art, of interwar Soviet and European graphic design, may combine déjà vu and surprise. You likely know the look, loosely termed Constructivist: off-kilter geometric shapes, vectoring diagonals, strident typography (chiefly blocky sans serif), grabby colors (tending to black and orangeish red), and collaged or montaged photography, all in thrall to advanced technology and socialist exhortation, in mediums including architecture, performance, and film. But you won’t have seen most of the works here. About two hundred of the roughly three hundred pieces on view were recently acquired by the museum from the collection of Merrill C. Berman, a Wall Street investor and venture capitalist. Fresh images catch the eye, as do unfamiliar names. The scope is encyclopedic, surveying a time of ideological advertisement, when individuals sacrificed their artistic independence to programs of mass appeal.

“The title ‘artist’ is an insult,” the German Communists George Grosz and John Heartfield declared in 1920. Grosz subsided into satirical painting and drawing, but Heartfield became a dedicated propagandist who cast Hitler as a puppet of capitalism and savaged centrist opposition to the tyrant’s rise. The cover of the show’s catalogue features Heartfield’s photograph of a worker’s soiled, forward–grasping hand, which was used for a poster promoting the Communist Party in a Weimar election in 1928. The image seems rather more menacing than rallying. It is at an extreme of the era’s politically weaponized design, which generally took less inflammatory forms in Germany and other European democracies. These countries incubated movements that are well represented in the exhibition but tangential to its Russian focus—Futurism, Dada, the Bauhaus. In Russia, there was no partisan campaigning because there was only one party. After 1917, it won the ardent allegiance of a generation of creative types who reconceived of the artist as a self-abnegating servant of the masses and the state—or who professed to, whatever their private misgivings. What is an artist, anyway? MOMA’s show stalks the question.

The Revolution usurped or bypassed the energies of the Russian Empire’s wartime avant-gardes, most prominently the metaphysically spirited Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, who is allowed a perfunctory cameo in “Engineer, Agitator, Constructor,” with one small abstract painting, from 1915. His day was over with the coup of Constructivism. He continued to support the Revolution, but his manner was adjudged too esoteric for proletarian tastes. Central to the new dispensation was the extravagantly gifted Alexander Rodchenko, who was really—almost helplessly—an artist, despite his militant posturing. In 1921, he painted three monochrome canvases—red, yellow, and blue—and announced that that was that for painting, which was henceforward obsolete. He also posed for a chic photograph as a platonic socialist worker, sporting a uniform of his own design and standing amid his own abstract sculptures. The celebrity gesture ran riskily afoul of Soviet impersonality and was not repeated. When, in 1932, he was accused of “bourgeois formalism,” he retreated to sports photography, finding a safe harbor that was denied his movement colleague Gustav Klutsis, a master of photomontage whose worshipful imagery of Josef Stalin didn’t forestall his ex-
A rt happens when someone wants to do it. Advertising and propaganda start from given ends and work backward to means. There's just enough genuine art in the exhibition to hone this point. The small Malevich, of cock-eyed red and black squares on white, elates. Then there's my favorite work, which I'd like to steal: a version of the smuggled Suprematist banner. Personal

And the poets working, a heroic soldier standing in sculpture: not thematic enough, but we've already closed out our tab, Love's boat has crashed on our lives. I'm in no hurry; I'll not storm your dreams. Already Two

 executions, on unclear grounds, in 1938. Rodchenko's diminution illustrates the Soviet tragedy of formal and visionary genius that was ground underfoot even before the inception, in 1928, of Stalin's ruinous first Five Year Plan, and of the coerced visual banalities of socialist realism. Not that the MOMA show indulges in historical drama. Its focus is scholarly, separately documenting creators who, as one redemptive credit to Soviet social reform of the time, include a great many women. It builds knowledge. Meaning is up to us.

As the exhibition unfolds, artists-penitent, shrinking from the perils of originality, dominate in Russia. Careerist designers teem in the West, with such fecund exceptions as László Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters. I know that I'm casting a wet blanket on work that might be—and surely will be—enjoyed without prejudice for its formal ingenuity and rhetorical punch. The architectonic and typographical razzmatazz of the Austrian-born American Herbert Bayer, the Dutch Piet Zwart, the Polish Władysław Strzemiński, and the Italian Fortunato Depero afford upbeat pleasures, and a strikingly sensitive Dada collage by the German Hannah Höch feels almost overqualified for its company. Strictly as a phenomenon in design, Constructivism and its offshoots merit celebration. It's just that the historical outcomes of the period get my goat, as does the show's sidelining of first-rate artists. Don't look for anything by Vladimir Tatlin, Malevich's innovative peer in sculpture: not thematic enough, plainly. The show's freest and most prolific stylist is also, for me, the most annoying: El Lissitzky. A star mentee of Malevich's who immigrated to Berlin in 1921, Lissitzky popularized the Constructivist look as an international style that wasn't about anything: jazzy formal clichés that hugely influenced commercial culture. At MOMA, approaches to abstraction—logo-like ciphers by the Hungarian László Peri, and stark geometries by the Polish Henryk Berlewi—deliver bright promise, then evanesc.

The show has a posthumous heart. It is lodged in the remains of the great poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who put an omnibus ego to work for emancipatory personal and social consciousness. Passionately embracing Bolshevism, he wrote successful plays, delivered stirring speeches, supervised important magazines, and became wildly popular. During the New Economic Policy, instituted by Lenin in 1921, he collaborated with Rodchenko, contributing snappy slogans to advertisements for light bulbs, cocoa, and cigarettes: highlights of the show. Even in love poems, his free-verse style—a sort of machine-tooled lyricism—stuns and arouses. (The American poet James Schuyler deemed the effect an “intimate yell.”) Politically, Mayakovsky can seem a fabulously specialized instrument of worldly transformation. In 1926, he called his mouth “the working class's/megaphone.” He wrote a three-thousand-line panegyric in praise of Lenin. But by 1930, increasingly subject to hard-line, and official, attacks for “petit bourgeois” subjectivity and other supposed apostasies, he was meekly policing his unauthorized feelings: “stepping/on the throat/of my own song.” A tortuous love life may have helped drive him—on April 14, 1930, at the age of thirty-six—to shoot himself. But it's impossible not to think of him as martyred by his own high church: a trashed prototype of the Soviet new man. His funeral was one of the largest in the regime's history.

In the catalogue, the poets Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky offer their fine translation of a poem that was found with Mayakovsky's body. It shows what was lost to the world with his suicide. The poem, with its comic and grand interiority, helps me imagine the unexpressed states of mind and soul of so many artists who were inspired and then blighted by a common cause:

It's already two a.m. You're likely asleep. The Milky Way’s a silver river through the night. I'm in no hurry; I'll not storm your dreams with the lightning bolts of telegrams. “It's not you,” as they say. “It's we.” Love's boat has crashed on our lives. But we've already closed out our tab, so there's no need to list each pain, pinprick, pang. You watch: silence settles on the earth. The night taxes the sky of its stars. In such an hour one stands up and speaks to the ages, to history, and all creation.
“I Am Sending You the Sacred Face” explores the saint’s unknowable mystery.

If the words “Expressionist musical portrait of Mother Teresa performed in drag from East Village closet” make your heart beat faster—and how could they not?—you’re in luck. Get yourself to YouTube, where you can find Heather Christian’s “I Am Sending You the Sacred Face,” the latest offering from Theatre in Quarantine, a “pandemic performance laboratory” created by the writer, director, and actor Joshua William Gelb. The closet in question is in Gelb’s studio apartment. It is four feet wide, eight feet tall, and two feet deep, and, like a magician’s scarf-belching hat, contains astounding multitudes. Gelb has been using the closet as a stage since the start of the pandemic, when he emptied it of its contents, painted it white, and stuck a camera where the door used to be. Sacrificing storage space in this town? That’s commitment.

In the past eight months, Gelb and a group of collaborators have put on upward of twenty shows, ranging from brief improvisations to a series of increasingly ambitious new works, ingeniously crafted with technical inventiveness and stylistic panache. In Gelb’s version of “Krapp’s Last Tape,” his closet becomes a space shuttle, gently floating off into a great abyss; in “Footnote for the End of Time,” his feverish adaptation of Borges’s short story “The Secret Miracle,” Gelb renders himself a character trapped in an animation, narrating a tale of art and persecution as it comes alive around him in hand-drawn illustrations. These works, odes to theatrical flexibility, should serve as a dare, and as an inspiration. Constraint is an undervalued blessing. A closet can be a castle when the spirit moves you.

“I Am Sending You the Sacred Face,” which was co-presented by Theatre Mitu’s Expansion Works, and was, like most Theatre in Quarantine productions, recorded live, could be called an abbreviated opera for a single singer. In a flitting monologue, spoken and sung, Mother Teresa (played by Gelb) tells us of her faith, her commitment to the poor, and her own poverty; she reproaches us for our indifference and herself for her vanity, and muses about the nature of time and God. She can be casual and confessional, as if speaking to a therapist, and imperious and commanding, too. Christian wrote the libretto and the shimmering, vehement music, which she recorded at home, playing the piano, synth, flute, and percussion. (Guitar and bass tracks were added by the sound designer and mixer Ada Westfall.) It is Christian whom we hear singing during the forty-minute piece, both solo and in pointillistic a-cappella backup; Gelb lip-synchs throughout.

Christian’s supple spring-water freshness puts me in mind of Sufjan Stevens, as does her interest in exploring religious themes in poetic, pop-inflected ways, but her work reaches for darker, rougher notes. Her path to devotion is paved with struggle and doubt. Earlier this year, on Playwrights Horizon’s “Soundstage” podcast, she debuted an exquisite musical work called “Prime.” Inspired by cloistered monks’ Masses, it is meant to serve as “a practical breviary” for prayer at the bleary hour of 6 A.M. on, say, an average Tuesday. Set it as an alarm and watch even the most sluggish sleeper leap out of bed. “Prime” ends up exploding into rousing, gospel-chorus joy, but Christian earns that communal release through aching moments of quiet privacy. “Shrink my need into
a tiny acorn,” she sings, with yearning. You don’t have to be a believer to take that prayer to heart.

“I Am Sending You the Sacred Face,” which Gelb directed with the choreographer Katie Rose McLaughlin, opens with the sound of a buzzing mosquito. Gelb’s closet has been draped in silvery tinsel; dressed as Mother Teresa, he stands inside it like an icon in a church niche, a makeup ring light transfigured into a glowing white halo over his head. (His costume pairs the saint’s trademark blue-striped wimple with a less orthodox sparkly sequined gown.) He claps, and the scene transforms into a Renaissance triptych, with Gelb framed in each gold-edged panel. Stivo Arnoczky is responsible for the wizardly video design, which uses a series of loops and alternating simultaneous streams to multiply Gelb like the loaves and fishes, while Kristen Robinson’s dazzling scenography serves as a reminder of the trippy strain that runs through Catholic aesthetics. Take a look at the Resurrection panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece, with its funky boudoir Jesus floating before an orb of psychedelic light, and recall that the monks for whom Matthias Grünewald painted his masterpiece cared for peasants dying of St. Anthony’s fire—an illness marked by hallucinations which was caused by eating rye infected with the same strain of fungus that was used, centuries later, to make LSD. Amid this splendor, Mother Teresa introduces herself. “I wear shoes that do not fit me./Stink and sweat, refuse to be known as a patron saint of dark-ness.”

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Each week, you, the readers, submit captions to a contest that runs on this page of the magazine. But you’re weary, and your face muscles ache from trying to grin and bear your way through 2020. So we called in the professionals—professional comedians, that is—to caption this cartoon by E. S. Glenn. Follow @newyorkermag on Instagram for a chance to pick your favorite.

“I’m sorry. I’m having trouble focussing. Why the fuck are you dressed like Santa?”
ANA FABREGA

“What? Can you explain it to me again? Do you know Jesus at all?”
MIKE BIRBIGLIA

“I really love oat milk. I can’t believe I used to drink whole milk! Ha ha, that’s so nasty.”
MELISSA VILLASEÑOR

“Hallucinations? I wouldn’t say so. Just these visions of sugar plums dancing in my head. Had ’em since I was a kid. That’s normal, right?”
JOHN HODGMAN

“I don’t have an Oedipus complex. I just didn’t like seeing you kiss my mom.”
SARAH COOPER

“I know I ask you this every time, but you’re not making a list, are you?”
APARNA NANCHERLA

“He sees you when you’re sleeping? He knows when you’re awake? It’s time we defund the North Pole.”
ZIWE FUMUDOH

“What does that even mean, ‘nice’?”
NICK OFFERMAN

“Now bring us the figgy Prozac.”
PETE HOLMES

“Do you accept Zelle?”
KATE BERLANT

“If I had been there that day, I know Grandma would’ve been O.K. . . .”
RACHEL PEGRAM

“I mean, I don’t want coal, but I deserve coal.”
TIM HEIDECKER

“Thanks for making time—I know this is your big day.”
ALYSSA LIMPERIS

“My insurance covers the first session, but your assistant said there’s a co-pay of four cookies?”
DEMI ADEJUYIGBE

“I think the problem is less that I need to believe again and more that my wife continues to sleep with my best friend.”
KYLE MOONEY

“In 2020, is the entire world on your naughty list?”
MARIE FAUSTIN

“Sorry, I just assumed I’d sit on your lap during the session.”
KAREN CHEE

“PS5s have sold out everywhere and I’m all out of options. How good was I this year?”
IFY NWADIWE

“I was six years old and got coal for Christmas! Of course I have problems.”
GARY RICHARDSON
For nearly fifty years, Médecins Sans Frontières, known in English as Doctors Without Borders or simply MSF, has provided lifesaving medical care around the globe. The organization—which runs four hundred and fifty projects in seventy countries—relies on being able to move experienced staff and medical supplies around the world at a moment’s notice. But as the coronavirus swept through the country, bringing travel restrictions, lockdowns, and unprecedented disruptions in the global supply chain for essential personal protective equipment, medicines, and medical materials, MSF had to dramatically shift its process.

One of the things that COVID-19 has done is to highlight the lack of a public-health system that we’ve had health-education campaign and mobile testing clinics. In nursing homes in Detroit and Houston, MSF provided direct, in-person support to reduce COVID-19 transmission in shared spaces and address the social burden of caregiving. In long-term-care facilities, carers experience anxiety and grief in their day-to-day reality, having lost colleagues and residents to COVID-19, while some come to experience stigma in their sector. Heather Pagano, a project coordinator in Michigan, said. During a time of heightened emotional stress, MSF helped understaffed and overworked teams cope, especially those suffering from vicarious trauma—what happens when someone experiences a traumatic reaction to something that hasn’t happened to them directly, but to a patient or colleague. “It’s not in health-care providers’ DNA to say that they need help,” Athena Viscusi, a clinical social worker and a psychosocial-care specialist, said. They’re helpers. And, even in this society, we give very mixed messages. We say, ‘Thanks for being a hero.’ . . . But when you’re saying you’re a hero, you’re saying, ‘You have some supernatural ability to handle [everything].’ And we don’t need to take care of you.”

As pharmaceutical companies’ vaccines are approved and begin to be distributed, and as more medicines and equipment approved to treat COVID-19 reach the market, MSF is working to ensure the availability and affordability of these products worldwide. “COVID-19 is new, but these issues of access are not,” Dana Gill, who serves as MSF’s U.S. policy adviser on access to medicines, said. The organization is calling on governments around the world to demand that companies disclose information and costs associated with research and development, in order to know if those companies are charging a fair price for COVID-19 medicine, vaccines, and diagnostics. According to MSF, companies should have even more of an obligation to public transparency now, since billions of dollars of taxpayer money are going toward R. & D. and the purchase of COVID-19 products. All COVID-19 health tools and technologies should be true global public goods, free from the price and access barriers that patents and other intellectual-property restrictions impose.

The work of MSF in the U.S. and across the globe is developed with the understanding that communities know the answers to their own problems, and that much of what the organization can provide is support and resources to help meet those needs. In New York City, where more than eighty thousand people experience homelessness, MSF partnered with local organizations to support at-risk groups. The nonprofit and its partners improved measures for infection prevention and control (I.P.C.) in facilities that serve people who are homeless or housing insecure, increased access to services through distribution of phones, and operated relief stations providing safe access to hygiene facilities. “There are a lot of services in New York City—and amazing organizations,” Michelle Mays, a nurse and MSF project coordinator in New York City, said. MSF was able to use its expertise to help them amidst this pandemic to give existing organizations a boost. Mays also noted the role that race plays in who is most impacted by the pandemic. “Eighty-six per cent of New Yorkers, experiencing homelessness are people of color, and fifty-three per cent of New Yorkers are people of color. So you see already just where those disparities are.”

Although MSF’s operations in the United States have now concluded, its work will continue through local partners and collaborations. In Puerto Rico, MSF’s program offering home-based care and COVID-19 monitoring for people isolated at home will continue, thanks to the newly formed organization Puerto Rico Salud, which was created by a group of local doctors and MSF’s Puerto Rican staff. “We know that the crisis is not over and that many people in Puerto Rico do not have adequate access to health care,” Sophie Delaunay, the MSF project coordinator in Puerto Rico, said. “COVID-19 has exposed many issues that need to be addressed so that people who get sick, whether from the virus or other illnesses, can access medical care. We’re close to the end of the pandemic with a sense of reassurance that the very next day after MSF leaves, our former medical staff through their newly formed group, Puerto Rico Salud, will continue this lifesaving work.”