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JUNE 20, 2016

# THE NEW JOEY

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**2020**

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I IV VII V



**"This kind of justifies the  
movie in a weird way?"**

*-The New York Times*

**"Zac Efron as Vincent Chase  
doesn't not work!"**

*-Variety*



BOOK BY  
**MARK WHALBERG**

MUSIC & LYRICS BY  
**STEVEN TYLER**

DIRECTED BY  
**McG**

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the movie  
**THE MUSICAL**

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for your money.**



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from here.**



# THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 20, 2016

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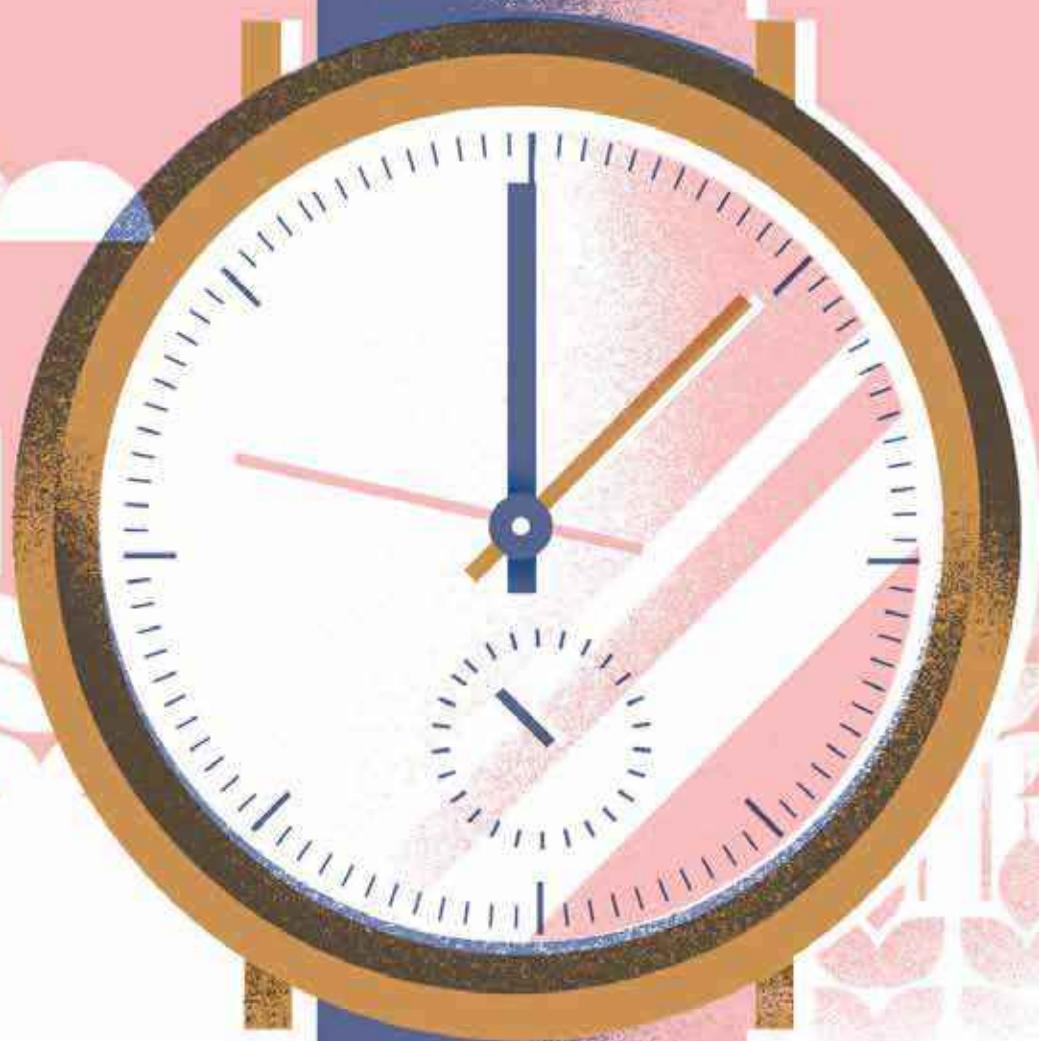
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**DRAWINGS** *Charlie Hankin, Robert Leighton, Jom Jorb, Shannon Wheelie, John Klossner, Reid Faylor, Mark Vigeant (“Cartoon Caption Contest”)*

**ADS** *Jesse Benjamin (“Entourage”), Stephen Unckles (“Orsnow”, “Homeland: Dog Version”, “Ubrzeitime”, “Equestrin”), Andrew Beck (“Einklock”), Taylor Moore (“Father Hats”, “Acela”, “Ballpark”), Kevin Bauer (“Jeff University”, “Loofah”, “Seedless”, “MetroStar”), James Folta (“Moyamota MaxiVan”), Elizabeth Stamp (“The Pastures at Farmingdale”)*

**SPOTS** *Sasha Taran*

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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Matt Crowley** (*Movies Preview*, p. 13) contributes to *The Onion*, but contributes nothing to society. He lives in LA. Sorry. Twitter: @matthewpcrowley

**Michael Yarsky** (*Above and Beyond*, p. 15, "Vowel of Silence," p. 44, "Keeping the Faith," p. 73) will publish his first seven-part autobiographical novel, *No No No, It's Myyyyy Struggle*, in December.

**Kathleen Jordan** (*Goings on About Town*, p. 6, "Nearing the Asymptote," p. 71) is a television writer and producer based in Los Angeles. She feels so humbled to be the voice of a generation.

**Matt Nelsen** (*Food & Drink*, p. 16) is the food comedian for this magazine.

**Matt Barats** (*Night Life Preview*, p. 9) is a staff writer and editor at the magazine. He commutes from Yonkers.

**Blythe Roberson** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 22, *Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 25) is a contributor to *ClickHole*, a headline contributor to *The Onion*, and previous to being blacklisted due to her participation in *Neu Yorker*, was a contributor to the *New Yorker dot com*.

**Kevin Bauer** (*Classical Music Preview*, p. 11) grew up in Sandusky, Ohio, graduated from The Ohio State University, then moved to Queens.

**Stephen Unckles** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 19) is a writer and television producer. His first book, *I Like Those Apples: On-screen Lust in Hollywood's Matt Damon Decades 1996-2016*, remains unpublished.

**Jordan Hall** (*"Knotty by Nature,"* p. 36) is a filmmaker in New Orleans, currently producing a documentary on the first African American rodeo clown. Help!

**Michael J. Wolf** (*Threatre Preview*, p. 7, "What's Inside of Me," p. 46, "Sex," p. 60) is a writer, and received the 2015 "Quietest Audience Member" Award from the NY Theater Foundation and prefers movies.

**Branson Reese** (*Cover*) just illustrated his first book, *How May We Hate You?*

**Joshua Mikutis** (*Dance Preview*, p. 10) is in rabbinical school. He graduated from Haverford College's *Without a (Noun)* School of Beep Beep Boop Boop.

**Sam Weiner** (*The Mail*, p. 5) is a staff writer for Seriously.TV.

**Tim Platt** (*"Three Poems by Tim Platt,"* p. 38) is a comedian, artist, and puppeteer living in Brooklyn. Check out [TimPlatt.squarespace.com](http://TimPlatt.squarespace.com) to learn more.

**Chris Michael Shea** (*"White Space,"* p. 31) spent most of 1997 on meth.

**Pat Landers** (*"Running Iron,"* p. 64) is a writer and editor who owes Sasha Frere-Jones \$5,000.

**James Folta** (*"Round and Round,"* p. 67) is a writer and a comedian. Wish that there was more to the story. [www.jamesfolta.com](http://www.jamesfolta.com)

**Daniel Sargeant** (*"The Hero Scourge,"* p. 56) is about 5'10", 175lbs. His Pulitzer-eligible collection *"You Call That a Sestina?"* is now available in pdf.

**Elizabeth Stamp** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 20) was recently named to Vice's list of "30 People We've Never Heard Of."

**Kady Ruth Ashcraft** (*Portfolio*, p. 50) teaches a poetics of Ayahuasca class at Bennington College. She also writes for *Funny or Die*.

**Andrew Lipstein** (*The Financial Page*, p. 23) founded *Os & Is Reads* ([Os-Is.com](http://Os-Is.com)), a digital bookstore/lit website, and works at Meural, an art tech startup.

**Nicole Silverberg** (*"Finding My Gallop,"* p. 26) is a comedian and writer named one of Brooklyn's 50 Funniest People by *Brooklyn Magazine*. #DahFook!?!?

**Brittney Soldano** (*Copy Editor*) is a copywriter, crossword puzzle enthusiast, and linguistic vigilante making the world a better place, one fixed typo at a time.

**Langan Kingsley** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 21) is a human being who lives in beep boop — malfunction — Brooklyn, New York. She enjoys patting dogs in a gentle, human way and eating delicious dinners of hard drives with her closest human friends.

**Caroline Schaper** (*Briefly Noted* p. 70) is a writer and comedian from the greatest city in the world: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She wrote for Letterman, and has been featured on CNN, GQ, THR, and other letters.

**Matt Strickland** (*Art Preview*, p. 12) is a standup comedian, Tweets at @strickbomb, and is currently hiding under his desk.

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*Everything that's in the magazine, and that's about it.*

*The Neu Yorker* was a labor of love from the people you see above (as well as our illustrators, and those art contributors listed in the *Table of Contents*); not a single cent was spent or made on this project. We've done our share of research on fair use and parody law (a solid Wikipedia skim), and are pretty sure we're good, but we do hope that the magazine-not-to-be-named understands that this is somewhere between satire, parody, and homage.

Thanks again to all that have spent their time on this, and for trusting us for absolutely no conceivable reason.

Goofs and gaffes,

*Andrew Lipstein & James Folta*  
Editors-in-Chief

## TOMB READER

As an anthropologist myself, I was excited to see our humble profession written about in your pages. However, your article on my colleague Dr. Frank Virto ("A Vacation In Ruins," March 13th) failed to answer several crucial questions: Did Virto recover any magical rubies from the France's Tumulus of Bougon? And if so, could the rubies be used to restore an elderly professor's youth and vigor when dipped in virgin's blood? Although your article was no doubt informative to a lay audience, its lack of details was troubling to those of us in the field.

*Prof. Elijah Draven  
San Francisco, Calif.*

## CAPTIVATING COLLECTION

Once again, Porter Wellman's genius for exploring the human condition through delightful specifics was on display. His profile of a young girl, Lisa Altschuler, with the world's largest sticker collection ("Sticker Shock," April 15th) was a treat. And yet Mr. Gladwell's article contained ZERO information about the revitalizing powers of rubies dipped in untainted blood. For instance, we learned that Ms. Altschuler collects stickers, but is she also pure of both mind and body? What is her address? I haven't much time.

*Prof. Elijah Draven  
San Francisco, Calif.*

## KING OF THE KEYS

I say, "Huzzah!" to another profile of Lang Lang ("Lang Time," May 11th)! Mr. Lang, or Chiang Chikan, as he was called when I first met him 200 years ago in Manchu-

ria, has always been a preternatural talent. Chiang, if you still possess the Ruby of El Baúl, know that I am not above murder for the cause of prolonging my life.

*Prof. Elijah Draven  
San Francisco, Calif.*

## TOP TV

My body grows weak. The centuries are rapidly catching up with me. Yet even with my death all but certain, I feel compelled to ask: Is your Rachel Blotnick watching the same TV shows I am? Yes, *Transparent* is wonderful—but how "realistic" can a show be when its characters spend almost no time sewing crimson jewels under their skin? Also, is Ms. Blotnick a virgin? I may be willing to trade ancient maps for her blood.

*Prof. Elijah Draven  
San Francisco, Calif.*

## FAN FOR LIFE

I read Charles Berns' review of Soledad Fariña Vicuña's latest poetry collection ("Verse With A View," June 1st) under a black moon—a moon I myself called to the sky by imbibing a cocktail of powdered ruby and thick, unspoiled ichor. As the arcane concoction dripped down my beard, onto my uncovered chest and into my naked pubic hairs, I cackled with strength. Let any who doubt my conviction tremble! And let Mr. Woods know that he has turned this sceptic of Chilean verse into a devoted admirer! I look forward to reading this fine publication for another 1,000 years!

*Prof. Elijah Draven  
San Francisco, Calif.*

## Father Hats of Fine, Fine France

For sixty years Father Hats of Fine Fine France has been collecting high quality chapeaus from the most remote farmhouses and petite shops of fine, fine France. We don't plan on stopping any time soon! This Winter we have assembled our most classic and father hats yet. Visit our website for our selection of walking sticks, money belts, and walking money sticks.



### THE GOOD ONE \$80

Ooh LaLa! Any Daddy would love this The Good One, one of our unchallenged classics. Imagine strolling down the Champs d'Elysee with this papa muffin top on your dady dome.

The Good One is cleaved from sheep and tweed grown in the Bordon't wine country, so you know this grey round of cover for your top mound is the real deal, or as they say in france, this is a great hat. That's why we call it The Good One, and soon you will too.

### WHARFIN' \$80



Hear the fish slap against the french river. Feel the croissant your son packed for you in your wicker fishing basket. Ooh lala! The fish are jumping, and your forehead is shaded from the wicked french summer sun. Our new Wharfin' works the way you want it to, whether you're skiing in the Alps or taking your simple son to a hill. Show up and be the boss of anyone in the woods or on the shore. Tying knots? Probably! You'll tie yourSELF in knots trying to learn how we've made an odorless outdoor Pop-top.



### BIGGS \$80

Uh oh, ever have trouble finding that perfect hat for a head with lots of thoughts? Not every head was made equal, and yours is medically different from your peers. Search no more, for, ooh la la!, this is the grande hapeau you've been looking for with your big eyeballs, probably. Biggs is your special boy. No more looking at other fathers and being reminded of the time you tried on a normal hat and it ripped up the back and your son heard it.

### HAT OF DEAD \$80



Ooh la la! Two boys were goofin in a tomb and found it. One of them tried it on and that was that for him. Do not buy this hat. Do not let your son buy it.

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Ooh la la!  
<http://fatherhatsbonjourmerci.co.uk>



JUNE 15 - 21, 2016

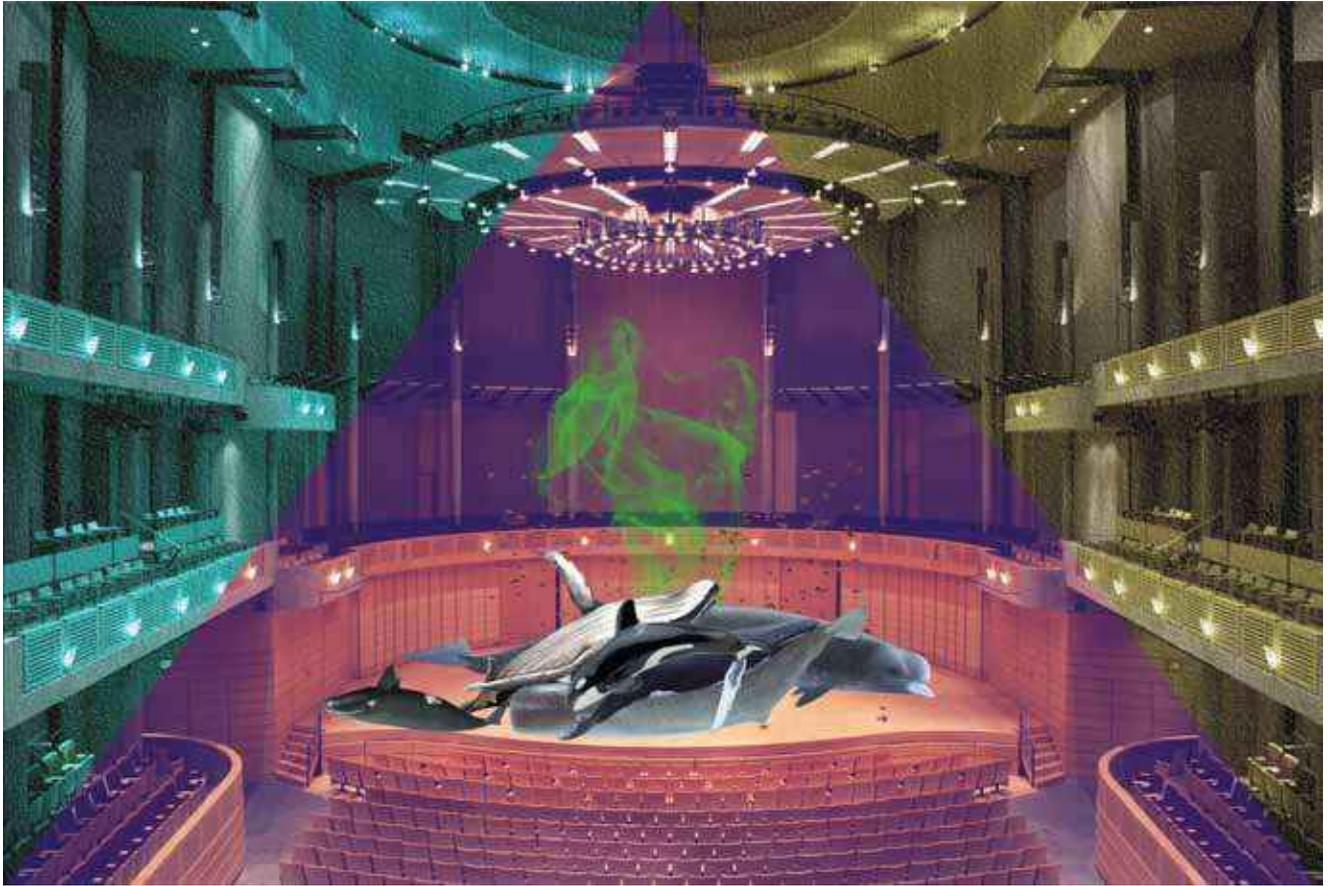
# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The New York art world has long awaited the moment when **Gregory Harry and Ileana Garalnik** of Murray Hill's vibrant underground clowning scene would realize the romantic potential of their on-stage chemistry in some intimate and frenzied pantomime. They are known as the "Ross and Rachel of clowns" (perhaps in reference to NBC's *Friends*, a once popular sitcom), yet for ten years casting has kept them platonic—a child and her clumsy caretaker in "Babysitter Blues," a housewife and her rabid dog in "NYU Performance," a lamp and her too-big lampshade in "Silly Lamp." Well, no longer must we wait. In a one-time performance entitled "Airbnb" this Friday at 233 Mott Street, Apt. 3B at 11:30 am, Harry and Garalnik will shed their clothes and make love for (at most, one imagines) one hour. In the tradition of clowning, the show will be wordless. Seating is first-come, first-served—\$15 or best offer, seniors free.

IMAGE BY JUAN LEGUIZAMON

# THE THEATRE



*These dead disgusting whales are at The New Theater for Aquatic Arts, Rockaway: 487-286-3923.*

## Death of a Whalesman

*Experimentation under the sea*

I DON'T GET this and also I hate it. After paying my \$60 ticket, I walked into the theater to see eight dead whales on stage. At first I was pretty intrigued, but after an hour and a half I was very intrigued. *Where are they going with this?* I mused, touching my chin thoughtfully as flies buzzed in and around my eyes.

Perhaps it was I. Had my years of analyzing and critiquing plays left me jaded and calculated, unable to discern beauty and daring in an act of bold defiance against form? Or had I simply walked into the back entrance of an aquarium morgue? Maybe the answer was a little bit of both.

After another hour I was just about to leave until a pack of condors descended into the theater and began gnawing on the whale carcasses. Now THIS got my attention, but as the show waned it proved to be another paper-thin *deus ex machina*, just more flash than substance. I appreciated the risks taken by the actors and the utter dedication to their death, but the critic in me yearned for structure. Where was the conflict? Why was there no dialogue? How did these massive carcasses get here?

I left after hour six, thoroughly bored and craving seafood. Overall, a passionate but confusing theatrical debut by writer Harmony Korine, although the part of Biff was played with verve and gusto.

—*Michael J. Wolf*

IMAGE BY MICHAEL J. WOLF

**I'm Weird But Funny**

Mike Birbiglia brings his latest work to the stage with stories about getting diagnosed with sleep apnea, being in love and then making a mistake, food he ate that was too hot, and pretending to be dumb. (*Triple Crown Theater, 54 8th Ave., New York. 545-212-4135*)

**Sugar Rysin in the Sun**

Mark McGrath's musical one-man show traces his momentous rise to fame as the voice of every generation ever. Missed opportunity in not having a flying number, but smart choice to avoid using any Sugar Ray songs. (*Amoeba Records, Newport Beach. 374-734-5323*)

**Rubix Cube Reloaded**

Michael Bay's theatrical debut stuns and sizzles as this mind-boggling toy becomes a killing machine with as many twists and turns as you'd expect from a cube. Many members of the audience were severely burned and/or maimed but still had a great time. (*Grauman's Chinese Theatre, 6801 Hollywood Blvd. 542-986-0045*)

**PeePaw Eats a Pancake**

This is just a frickin' guy named PeePaw eating a frickin' blueberry pancake. That's it. (*IHOP, SoHo. 845-709-3003*)

**Jewish Town 8000**

The riveting story of an entire TOWN entirely populated by Jewish people set far in the future. Stand-out performances by Barbra Streisand and Adrien Brody, two big-time Yids. (*Broadway Theater, 1545 Broadway. 736-049-2677*)

**The Sleeping Bag Wars**

Written and produced by 7th grader Lindsay Hammil, this semi-autobiographical play contains a whole lot of kids stuck head first in sleeping bags. (*New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 898-234-7456*)

**Sex: The Play**

Great art always pushes limits and this piece definitely does that. An exploration of the erotic and tantalizing, mixed with the grotesque and nauseating. So much grunting. (*Classic Stage Company, 234 W. Renigald St. 980-786-3400*)

**Uncle Sam's Lament**

This reviewer hasn't seen so many flags in one place since streaking drunk through the U.N. A brave critique of modern war, *Uncle Sam's Lament* boldly asks the question, "Why do we all kill each other?" and then follows that up with the less bold question, "Is it for money? Because if so, I'm cool with that, just lemme get some." There was never a dull moment in this performance, from the musical number "I Can't Afgani-stand It," to the 45-minute sex scene between two drones, to the playbills which were the printouts of the Wikipedia page for Benghazi (which I skimmed). Personally, I've never been to war, and now I no longer want to. Written and directed by Oliver Stone with great performances by Sam Waterston as Uncle Sam, John Krasinski as Bill Clinton, Oliver Platt as Mean Terrorist, and Benedict Cumberbatch as Barack Obama. Huh, just realized they're all white. Very cool. (*Jiffy Lube Amphitheatre, 1600 Washington Ave. 442-609-6587*)

**Glengarry Glen Ross 2:****Glengarrier Glen Rosser (or Mitch and Murray's Revenge)**

Much like tight sweaters, sequels are notoriously hard to pull off. David Mamet (who I thought was dead) struggles to find his footing in this indulgent exercise. The play consists entirely of Stephen and Daniel Baldwin screaming the alphabet at each other for two hours, with a one-hour intermission. The theater did provide free coffee, which made me chuckle until I realized it was *Nespresso* (I only drink Stumptown). Long story short, wait for this play to come out on DVD. (*Shubert Theater, 225 W. 44th St., New York. 847-948-4244*)

**My Sick Children**

This reviewer has only cried three times in his life; first, when Lance Armstrong left his wife for Sheryl Crow. Second, when I stubbed my toe real frickin' bad last week on a little nail poking up on my deck. And third, during every second of *My Sick Children*. The play delivers everything the

title promises. Chelsea Handler makes a bold step out of her typical oeuvre to play the wailing mother Gwendolyn, whose children are real sick with stage three asthma. She tries soup, she tries Tylenol, she even tries yelling at them to stop coughing...but none of it works. The sparse set design (the play takes place inside a box of tissues) only highlighted the intense emotional scenery. My only critique is that I wish the actors playing the children didn't also have to die. Great commitment but so sad. (*Beth Israel Center for the Arts, 10 Nathan D Perlman Pl. 212-440-8650*)

**Eviction**

Performance art is not for everyone but when executed correctly, it can be form breaking and breathtaking. *Eviction* is a relentless tour de force by newcomer writer/performer Julia Lapinsky, who never once breaks as character as she plays "Obtuse Landlord." The performance began as an inconspicuous notice taped to my door, a flawless imitation that blended in with the restaurant flyers. So much attention to detail that I almost mistook it for an actual eviction notice. The performance continued for the next four months in various forms: emails, phone calls, even spontaneous monologues by Julia performed at my doorstep for me alone. This multimedia approach to theater will keep this playwright relevant for many years to come, but it's her impressive dedication that shines the brightest. I was nearly frightened by her manic screaming and vicious threats before remembering that it was all an act. The only downside was the lesser performance by the two police officers. Their aggressive physical choices felt overblown and melodramatic and I never quite believed them as they twisted my arm behind my back or slammed my face into my carpet. Overall, an experimental and memorable show. (*3 Russell St. Apt 2L, Brooklyn. 413-626-0677*)

**The Play They Put On Inside the Movie 'Birdman'**

Pretty good! (*Red Box, 32nd St. and 4th Ave., New York. 234-975-2933*)

# NIGHT LIFE



## Flannel and vinyl

*The origin behind the midwestern folk collective of “accidental musicians”*

THE NEW IOWA-BASED folk collective Fort Blanket answers the question, “What would it sound like if an assortment of neglected forest animals came together and attempted to harmonize?” The five band mates, all non-Midwestern natives, seem to have arrived at music by accident. Before putting out singles like, “My River Is Yonder Creek,” and “Howlin’ Heart of Lonesome Creek,” the group met working together at a local Iowa City bakery where they sported minimum-wage lifestyles by choice.

For months they were simply bakers, baking the necessary quota of loaves that the day demanded while working shifts in pre-dawn silence. But their lives began to change, as Susan (tambourine player #2) recalled, “Well, one day Kenneth showed up wearing this hat. Like a wide brimmed folksy-hat. The rest of us kind of noticed and pretty much just kept baking as usual. Well the next week, there was Debby rocking a neat little vest with a western flare to it, and we sort of just influenced each other on a subconscious level.”

These fashion selections emerged into their weird, vague, misguided identity. “Nobody really knew why it was happening; it simply snowballed from one of those wide brimmed Beck-looking hats,” added Susan. Terry (tin can player) even got a sleeve of tattoos despite having no real-world experiences to back up the decision. The five individuals proceeded to shut people out of their lives who didn’t adhere to their snappy-dressing-folk-baker-poser schema.

This unwarranted image was capitalized upon by deciding to create a band. These bakers were not musicians to begin with, but they learned enough basics in order for Kenny to strum towards a chorus, so the group could clap in unison and “harmonize about nature themes” in a way that gave a manufactured sense of inspiration.

Although the majority of Fort Blanket members are originally from Florida, geographical boundaries appear to be no match for lazy co-opted identities spawned out of fear. The hats got bigger and the denim got tighter. Not one member of the band has ever been to a creek before, however when they write songs, that is certainly a dominant theme for some reason: the theme of “creeks.” Either way, most critics agree they sound exactly like Mumford & Sons.

—Matt Barats

### The ATM Machines

When their debut album “Dreaming Fast in Slow Motion” was first reviewed in 2004, the driving pop-punk sounds of The ATM Machines were described as “suburban Baltimore’s love letter to Fall Out Boy.” This sentiment rings true today as they continue to crank out top-notch pop punk licks in the face of an uninterested mainstream audience. Due to the fleeting nature of the pop-punk movement, it would appear that The ATM Machines are, by proxy, representing a music genre whose sole purpose is to serve as the butt of jokes in many reference-based improv comedy sets across the country. (*June 18, Park Slope Street Fair, Brooklyn 2pm*)

### Melty Cheese

Influenced exclusively by big hair metal and big tobacco, this heavy-duty power group sports a dedicated fanbase known as “cheese shreds.” The band was infamously cut out of the documentary “The Decline of Western Civilization Pt. II: The Metal Years,” for being too “melty” for the cameras. The band has relied on the same marketing ploy in their 30 years of touring, wherein they advertise that the show will be their last “shirtless” performance. However, as of yet, nary a shirt is to be seen on a Melty Cheese member or any of their cheese shred fans. (*June 18, Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancy St. 8:30 pm*)

### White Whale

Often confused for a literary homage, White Whale is just a fat pale dork named Carl Nelson, a retired computer programmer and statistics guru who created and holds the sole patent on the “human dance algorithm.” During his down time, Carl would famously keep stats on what made humans tick “dance-wise.” (*June 18, Doubletree Ballroom, 243 W. 55th St., 3rd floor*)

### Chong \$hot

One the most dominant personalities to emerge from the elusive Euro Trip-Slop movement is none other than Hungarian-born Chong \$hot. Her style can be simmered down now to a mix of rave, dance, eletronica, ambient, tectonic rock, trip, slop, trop, and classical techno-orgy. As a self-proclaimed “creative manic depressive,” Chong’s recording ethic consists of blending a variety of uppers and “grab-bag pills” in an Oster blender, and holding “smoothie recording sessions” which last anywhere from 6–7 months. During this latest session, Chong put out 23 feature-film length albums along with the EP containing hit track “4saken m3.” For the remainder of the calendar year, Chong and the band head to the Northern Territories of Canada and hibernate (a la bears) until inspiration strikes again. (*June 19, Warehouse Brewery Docks, 25 Seventh Ave. 6pm–6am*)

**Fingered Nicholson**

As the new contemporary standard in alto jazz saxophone, seeing this trio live (aka “getting fingered”) is a must. With their bee bop bridges into their flim flam versus, this finger-licking trio of dark-sunglasses-wearing-jack-nicholson-looking twentysomethings will have you fleebopping, skeeskatting, weetweezing, and diddykonging on the dance floor all night shlong. (*The Smokey Crystal*, 117 W. 27th St. 212-555-2232)

**The Tom Cat 5**

This Midwestern collective hails from Omaha, NE where they are among the most prolific jazz musicians working today. Unfortunately for their fans, most of their music never makes it into the recording studio. Sure, all the more reason to see them live, but why is that? Well, they can only put out 2 albums per year since they share their studio, “The Beehive,” with Omaha-based rap-metal group 311. They could move to another space, but as Tom Cat bassist Glenn Sherman muses, “There is something pure and unadulterated about the sound created here. We can feel it, and we sure as hell know 311 can feel it too.” (*Sky-light Books*, 1818 N. Vermont Ave, New York 4:30pm)

**The Big Truth**

Playing their debut album “Meaning of Life” in its entirety this Sunday, the sagacious quartet promises that the very question will be realized by the end of their set. The audience is encouraged to sit back, enjoy some hookah, and ponder the big question. The quartet has advertised that those who purchase a hoodie at the merch table might even understand the meaning of life more fully than others. The Big Truth has imposed a mandatory 15-drink minimum for this event. (*Mezzrow*, 163 W. 10th St. 7:30pm)

**Bon Jazz-itate**

What started as a traditional Harlem octet has grown into something fresh. With their “knack for fusion,” the band combined styles of New Orleans and

NYC Jazz, but the band didn’t stop there. They kept the fusion alive by adding influences from West Africa and Tokyo, but the band didn’t stop there. They went on to combine tastes of India and North Asia. The group has grown into the first ever “jazz octet fusion food catering band.” Not only do they seamlessly slip in and out of world jazz styles...they cook them, serve them, and even offer delivery on Seamless! During solos, the remaining band members assume roles of host, waiter, chef, waterboy, and menu guy. So, slip on your dance shoes, grab a date, and don’t forget your “Jazz-itate.” (*Midtown Catering Hall*, 131 E. 49th St. 6pm music/dinner)

**Billy Style Duo**

Wondering where “the groove” has gone? Haven’t seen “the rhythm” around lately? That might be because Saxom-flutist Billy Style has taken them and packaged these elements into a tone-driven razzmatazz jazz product in the form of his latest album. A bit of history: upon notably discovering his flutist having an affair with his wife in the autumn of 2013, Billy Style used a sturdy adhesive to conjoin a flute to his “barry sax” and downsized the band to a duo. Billy’s wife, Kat, can still be heard on snare drum, and provided artwork for the latest album, “Family Matters.” (*Blue Jazz Blue*, 24 Broadway, 11pm)

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DANCE

**The Steven Rice Company**

After their indefatigable leader Steven Rick was arrested for his role in a Ponzi scheme involving didgeridoos, many naysayers saw that to be the doom of his company. Now with most of those naysayers sent to Rikers, the Company has had the freedom to tap back into its pre-didgeridoo roots—interpretive dance of the oeuvre of the Toledo Youth Didgeridoo Chorus. Their newest piece, “Go on Toledo, Don’t throw away all those turtle-necks,” will premiere under the Brooklyn Bridge June 19, 5:15am. Tickets are half off with a donation of a single sock.

**Team Dance!**

With their copyright lawsuit with Team Dance of Bulgaria resolved, Team Dance is back with a brand new piece of punctuation tacked on, the exclamation point (pronounced *shwa*). Inspired by the post-structuralist paintings, theories, and Scrabble strategy of Abe Ralston, their new piece “The Ape Is the Ape of His Ape-Dad” is delicately performed with charm and blazes with gentle movements and confident flicks of the hips. Attendees should look out for free Green Bay Packers’ “cheeseheads” that they will be asked to wear as slippers. (*G.K. Arts Center*, St. Ann’s Warehouse, June 18–30, 7pm)

**West Village Ballet**

The young choreographer, Styles With CREAM (real name unknown), doesn’t hide from the big themes: the nature of

the self, the brutality of the animal kingdom, the making of tense faces while on the elliptical. West Village Ballet will be the first group to debut this piece. They will also be the first to use my Uncle Ken’s basement as the performance space it was always meant to be. (*Ken Bernstein*, 55 Lafayette Ave., Apt. 4B, Brooklyn, please don’t tell Aunt Carol, June 16, 6:30pm).

**Emma Paul**

Emma Paul, an interdisciplinary artist who works mostly with video, will make her breakout solo performance, “AAH-HJJJJJKKKK: The Cry of the Banshee.” Emma Paul will juxtapose sonic themes from “The Electric Slide” with images of Dmitri Shostakovich as she overheats Hot Pockets, the proud sponsor of this performance. In this get-back-to-basics performance, Paul delicately wields her limbs as she contorts to attempt different microwave settings, including “Defrost” and “Popcorn.” (*MOMA PS1 22-25 Jackson Ave.*, Long Island City, June 18–25, 4pm)

**“Snaps!”**

Conceived by the eccentric and hermetic choreographer Rabbi Steven Jackson, this rap-rock infused performance uses abstruse concepts that I am legally forbidden to write about due to the intensity of their non-disclosure agreement. It is not especially attention grabbing, but they gave me a few free pens. (*New York Live Arts*, 219 W. 19th St., June 16, 8pm)

# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES



## Deuczynski

*Matthew Deuczynski*

WHILE THE RECENT announcement of New York classical music mainstay Matthew Deuczynski as general manager of the Metropolitan Opera was met by trepidation from many—simultaneously held roles at various opera organizations around the city have made his name synonymous with professional overextension for the better part of the past decade—his programming choices this season move to reverse the public opinion that he has lost his touch, taste, and bearing on reality. As such, the Met’s hyper-successful Artist Highlight Series continues with an ideological defense mounted by Deuczynski himself: an enchanting rendition of Wagner’s entire “**The Ring of the Nibelung**” wherein the role of Brünnhilde is played by the spellbinding Samantha Simmons and all of the Repertory Orchestra members are playing saxophones. Stepping into the director’s chair to helm a heavily altered libretto of his own design, Deuczynski takes the opportunity to come into his own, eschewing the visual panache of the archetypical Ring Cycle in favor of a minimalist take involving actors clad in solemn black performing plié squats while holding saxophones. Advertised producer Samuel Gurewitz-Johnson,

originally scheduled to take the reigns from an otherwise occupied Matthew Deuczynski, has been relieved of duty by Matthew Deuczynski.

Those looking for lighter fare may find solace in the Met’s simultaneous staging of Rimsky-Korsakov’s “**Tale of the Golden Czar**” (featuring Piotr Tetzloff in the title role, on June 18), with the Noblewoman role embodied by the quietly innovative Tiana Lam. The shorter running time (each section clocking in at just under two hours) proves a perfect fit for Matthew Deuczynski, who steps in to direct between “Ring” duties. The bouncy syncopations of the arrangement spring effortlessly from the bells of the nearly half-dozen saxophones ambitiously added by conductor Matthew Deuczynski, whose newly translated book allows the opera to be sung in its original Russian.

June 16–18 marks a special limited presentation of Rachmaninoff’s “**Three Meditations**,” the tale of a peasant (Irving Frasier) locked up erroneously for his role in attending a dance. The King, played by Margot Lori-Parks, is at first a sullen, loveless man before being transformed by the dulcet tones of Frasier’s alto saxophone. The cast—a curious medley of Metropolitan favorites past and present—is a delight to behold, and the role of Frasier’s saxophone is played by director Matthew Deuczynski.

### Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra

While the annual performance of the orchestra’s “**Twin Fates of Coriolanus**” is never without its fair share of behind-the-curtain turbulence, the events of late winter have left many in the community wondering whether Wolfgang Kraus’ formidable adaptation has at last escaped the page and bled into real life. Previews of the production were halted abruptly following the absconion of tenured conductor Matthew Deuczynski, but continued once new hope was found in the form of mustachioed director Datthew Meuczynski, who is new in town.

### Juilliard Orchestra

Stepping into the shoes of the recently departed Matthew Deuczynski, newly minted co-conductors Benjamin Lee and Datthew Meuczynski strike gold with a take on Beethoven’s “**Symphony No. 2**” involving zero string instruments and three added rows of saxophones. Section heads Fran Cho and Tessa Robbins relish their view from the limelight with a dueling soprano and tenor duet. Antonio Bennett occupies the piano bench but trades his signature ivory keys for a sax.

### New York Philharmonic

Presenting a new work in Diego Van Buren’s “**One Golden Night**” (the heart-wrenching story of a world without saxophones), conductor Lupita Schwartz takes a stripped-down approach by replacing the orchestra with fourteen rows of saxophones. By the third movement, this much is clear: her gambit has worked. An electric charge fills the air, punctuated by the sound of guest soloist Matty Deuce on the jazz horn.

## RECITALS

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

No fewer than a hundred saxophones lead the charge in Matthew Deuczynski’s production of Godrich Fowler’s “**Ende der Stück**,” but while they anchor a lovely presentation, the everpresence of a bass clarinet is neither asked for nor welcomed.

—*Matthew Deuczynski*

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# ART

## MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

### METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

“Are Doors Really Necessary?”  
Through June 29.

### MOMOO

“Moomoos and Rompers: Can anything be a murder weapon?”  
Through July 22.

### Guggenheim Museum

“Milli Vanilli: shared ironic likes turn to desperate memories.”  
Through September 19.

### The Brooklyn Museum

“Coney Island: Visions of a forgotten Honeymoon.” Through August 1.

### The Whitney Museum

“Loneliness: In some ways, its own reward.” Through September 7.

### New Museum

“Eddie Vedder: Did an obsession with a perfect man damage a marriage?” Through July 15.

### Museum of the Heart

“How can you mend a broken heart: A Cher review.” Over.

### Bronx Museum

“Eleanor Corinthian: The Human Bag.” Through December 1.

### Museum of Sex

“Erectile Dysfunction: Maybe it’s your fault?” Through August 3.

### Sculpturecenter

“A Boomer’s look at a millennial’s treachery.” Through my father’s departure back to St. Louis.

### My Apartment

“My Wife: When did the cheating start?” Indefinitely.

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## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Metropolitan Museum

#### “The Lederhosen of Mortdecai Saltzman”

The focus of this historical review is the leather knee-length breeches of famed German lutist and snort Mortdecai Saltzman (1785–1891). Saltzman’s Leders, many of which he hosened himself, are displayed with a lyrical buoyancy and a cunning eye for detail. On close inspection one can see many of the brass fasteners bear a striking resemblance to a woman who, until very recently, resided in my domicile engaging in marital bliss.

### Museum of the Fifth Ascension

#### “The World is ending in 6 weeks”

The simplicity of this group show is what gives it its power. Descending down the 50-foot staircase into New York’s newest museum the smell quickly becomes the most overwhelming sensation, yet once your eyes adjust to the darkness you realize it’s because the nameless artists have staged a series of what look like very lifelike human ribcages around the space, which they have decorated in reclaimed materials from the New York streets. The songful way they request you to stay will come with a phlegmatic allure not usually seen in basements this rat infested. Their commitment only rarely seems put on. I for one hope life imitates art and I can soon shed this mortal coil.

## GALLERIES SHORT LIST

### “A bunch of Warhol’s Hair”

Through August 9

### “I Can’t Make You Love Me the Bon Iver Version”

Through August 17

### “Is it because his podcast has more subscribers?”

Through September 33

### “Words she used to mispronounce”

Through October 2018

### “Tears in Jars. Tear in Cars.”

Through August 21

### “Tinder: An old man’s game?”

Through 2021

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## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### “Horror Business”

Three New Jersey youth approach the small New Jersey town of Lodi, as one might approach a lover. Their tender photography is succulent, their imagery ample. They capture the hometown of Punk Rock icon Glenn Danzig with a voluptuous potency. I have not known the touch of a woman since Eleanor left.

### Paulina Tchilavski

This concise retrospective of Tchilavski’s first 120,000 works is refreshing in its brevity. My wife was not brief when describing the extent of her affairs, and stands in direct contrast to Tchilavski’s self control. Paulina Tchilavski, born of Polish decent in a tent behind a Wawa, has a classic grace, which some women never find, despite the generous amounts of high-end yoga and dance classes which were paid for.

## MOVIES

**“American Conspiracy: The Bilderbear Group”**

This complex retrospective assembles every piece of evidence, no matter how controversial, about the infamous Bilderbear Group that controls the nation’s toy economy. It requires signing a wavier, as Jean-Luc Montenegro’s gallery cannot guarantee your safety if the Bilderbears consider you a threat. I pray to receive that sweet release from a Bilderbear. I’m scared to die, but I also wish I was never born.

**My Wife The Trollop**

Tearing down modern art conventions, Reginald Corinthian has created a stunning retrospective on a marriage which by all accounts should have been one of history’s greatest love stories, and yet through a series of photographs and sketches, Corinthian weaves a narrative that shows how it collapsed under the weight of treachery. Many of the self-portraits, nudes, show that in no way should any woman be dissatisfied with Corinthian physically. Almost Borgeesian in display, the show challenges the viewer to look past the financial struggles, sexual frustrations, and differing life paths of a failing marriage to see the rot at the center, some girls are just mean.

**Appendix I:** Eleanor, if you’re reading this I want you to know that I forgive you, and if you’ll come home, I’ll take you back with open arms. My world is darker for your absence. I live to see your face on the veranda once more.

**Appendix II:** But if you’re still shackled up with that Spaniard, don’t even think about returning. I’ve already sold the horses for glue.

**Appendix III:** I’m sure I could get them back before they’re turned. Please come home.

**Killdoer**

Bland. James Bland. The umpteenth installment in the continued misadventures of England’s least clandestine secret agent seems calculated to leave audiences shaken, not stirred. A particularly cranky and craggy Daniel Craig trudges through a rote plotline rife with inscrutable motives, thinly sketched personages, and a double helping of oh, seven or so explosions per minute. Broad. James Broad. As he goes, he runs afoul of a boilerplate beauty (Amanda Seyfried) and the characteristic coterie of criminals, headed by the inimitable, if not intimidating, Chiwetel Ejiofor. Its muddled mediocrity aside, box office receipts suggest that we’re stuck with this spy for eons to come. Brand. James Brand. —*Antoine Path*

**Worlds Apart**

Pixar’s dream factory spins the tale of an alien fixer (Ed Helms) who must journey to Earth to discover the whereabouts of his planet’s missing children. While the interplay between Helms’ luckless Bleeblo Jones and William H. Macy’s Horatio Alger of a deuteragonist escalates pleasurably from *tête-à-tête* to *mano-a-mano*, the *mise-en-scène* cannot match the droll japery of the dialogue. Director Pete Doctor (*Up, Inside Out*) strives for an elegiac ebullience in this peripatetic pseudo-thriller, painting an Orwellian future of Kafkaesque proportions, but a *Kishōtenketsu* structure unwisely peppered with *Verfremdungseffekt* ultimately deflates into a grandiloquent rodomontade of a denouement. Featuring a decidedly non-diegetic score by Randy Newman. —*Rupert Granby*

**Homicide Home**

Alfred Hitchcock’s seminal thriller *Strangers on a Train* captivated audiences with an intriguing cast of characters and a breathlessly taut storyline. Alas, Rian Johnson’s newest movie, which centers on a family of assassins, is a far cry from such classic finery. One cringes to imagine how Hitchcock would respond to this filmic folde-rol, which is as senselessly personal as it is offputtingly innovative. As the family patriarch, Michael Fassbender refuses to be either Don Corleone or Popeye Doyle, instead stubbornly exploring new terrain. Never once in its interminable 122 minutes does *Homicide Home* adequately answer the cinematic question, “why bother making a movie about crime after *Goodfellas*?” With Bill Hader, who isn’t as good as Charlie Chaplin. —*Daniel Dobson*

**So There You Go**

Woody Allen’s latest filmic foray is more carapace than caprice: a crusty and declawed cinematic crustacean with an abstruse texture, brackish flavor, and a philosophy decidedly, well, shellfish—in other words, it’s not kosher, Woody! Hugh Laurie stars as a suicidal flutist who embarks on an affair with a high school ingénue (Selena Gomez) possessed by the ghost of François Truffaut. At once turgid and tossed off, this pernicious potboiler pushes and prods but never proceeds with any pretense of the pleasures that pervade Allen’s previous projects. With Albert Brooks, Anne Hathaway, and Ed Harris as a zombified Federico Fellini. —*A.P.*

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### It Goes to Show

This seriocomic neo-noir from the Coen brothers tracks a puerile parvenu of a director (Oscar Isaac) who becomes embroiled in a kidnapping plot. As the shaggy dog tale unspools, he encounters a money-stuffed McGuffin, an atavistic cabal of producers, and an agglomeration of anatopism—all appurtenances of the Coen milieu. Indeed, the film's portrait of a prelapsarian Hollywood rife with antediluvian hubris, long the bailiwick of the brothers' oeuvre, has curdled from *raison d'être* to *idée fixe*. Despite pretensions towards Bildungsroman, the film never punctures the Panglossian purview of its protagonist, rendering his philosophy scant more than an effluvial shibboleth. Weltanschauung aside, the film's true Achilles' Heel is its Chekov's Gun, the implementation of which is more Gordian Knot than Occam's Razor—the Coens would be well served to heed that platitudinous leitmotif: Keep It Simple, Stupid. —R.G.

### Riptide

Sam Raimi's soggy shocker is a self-styled self-reflexive satire of *The Shining's* symbology, swapping out a secluded seraglio for a spooky ship. While copious contemporary chillers have cleaved scrupulously to the Kubrik rubric (*Shutter Island*, *The Witch*) rarely have its riches been ripped off as tidily as in *Riptide*. Yet the trademark tension of the Torrance tribe never tips into a torrent for Raimi's ragtag troop of tourists, whose terror instead trickles into a torpor, and there's no iniquitous Nicholson or demure Duvall on deck to stir the waters—instead,

heeeeere's John C. Reilly, as the wryly recalcitrant captain, joined by a Danny doppelganger (Jacob Tremblay) devoid of Dan Lloyd's disturbing demeanor, and an obsequious sea-cook (Courtney B. Vance) whose performance proves he's not his Crothers keeper and left me wanting to say, "Scat, man!" By the final fright, the film proves it's not fit for a King with numerous flaws that cannot be Overlooked sure to leave audiences Red, Ruminating that Raimi should have been a better caretaker. Repeat after me: All reworking and no playfulness makes *Riptide* a dull joy. —A.P.

### Seven By Seven

This early satire from the great Billy Wilder blooms into effervescent light in a lovingly remastered rerelease playing at the Film Forum. Fred MacMurray shines as Harry Mills, a down-on-his-luck adman whose fortunes change as a result of mistaken identity. Wilder's lampoonic swipes at wartime rationing and the Red Menace remain as devastatingly hilarious as when they were originally penned. Indeed, *Seven By Seven's* tightly wound mousetrap of a story makes it a hundred times more gut-busting than the so-called "comedies" of the current season. Simultaneously, its tender and unforgettable love story make the film a thousand times more gut-wrenching than the loosely defined "dramas" of today. Though hampered slightly by its 45 missing minutes, the remaining scenes constitute an unforgettable experience from a cinematic titan worth revisiting again and again. —D.D.

# ABOVE & BEYOND

## A Celebration of a True Harlem Renaissance

City-dwellers more prone to shopping in SoHo ought to venture up to Harlem to whet their appetites. Now standing atop the demolished grounds of James Baldwin's former church, the picturesque **Harlem Renaissance Shopping Outlet** comprises a Rockport shoe outlet, All-Alpine skiing gear, and the largest Trader Joe's in the Boroughs. Those previously averse to the area's darkened dilapidation will feel at home among the stunning, blanched marble of this "contemporary bazaar." An open house for the 'Sance Luxury studio apartments (beautifully renovated from rent-controlled family housing) will be held from 10am thru 7pm Saturday and Sunday. Appointments for viewings are made on a highly selective basis. (*Intersection of Adam Clayton Powell and Adam Clayton From U2 Blvds., Harlem*)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

### Silicon Valley Antiques Show at Queens Micro Center

As it does every month, the **Silicon Valley Antiques Show** fills the decadent halls of the Queens Micro Center with exhibitions of technological artifacts dating as far back as the *Protoinstagrammatic Era* of early 2010. Relics of long-lost eras include pieces from the Macintosh Reformation as well as daguerreotypes of 16-bit screensavers, many of which are redolent of the most resplendent Flemish vistas. Silicon Valley exhibitors also politely request that women over 30 do not attend. (*Kissena Blvd. at 71st Ave. 718-674-8400*)

### Heartbreakers Yard Sale at The 'Cosgroves' Residence

'Miss' Elena Cosgrove, apparently 'underappreciated' (despite being the beneficiary of innumerable goods and affections), shall auction away Americana-inspired curiosities compiled through decades of turbulent marriage by this correspondent, her ex-husband. Among many collectibles that would be considered my property in a just and benevolent world are: a hand-crafted birdbath, vintage photography of our happiest memories together, and an

heirloom *matryoshka* doll I wanted to give a daughter someday. Sure to be a panopticon of shattered dreams, this auction will delight even the most reserved emotional sadist. (*Still Technically My House, Greenpoint*)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### New York Review of Books: Q&A with Colm Toibin

Colm Toibin, reviewer for *The New York Review of Books* and *New Yorker* contributor, will be reading from his novel *Brooklyn*. The novel was reviewed in *The New York Review of Books* by *New York Review of Books* reviewer Claire Messud (who is also a *New Yorker* contributor). Messud will host a Q&A alongside Stacy Schiff, whose newest book *The Witches* had an excerpt published in *The New Yorker* as well as a review in *The New York Review of Books*. According to *The New Yorker*, Toibin's novel "creates a narrative of remarkable power, writing with a sparseness and intensity that give the minutest shades of feeling immense emotional impact." The evening will conclude with a panel discussion on the topic "Is New York's Literary Scene Too Insular?" It will be moderated by *New Yorker* contributor Nick Hornby, who wrote the screenplay for *Brooklyn*. This event is closed to the general public. (*New York Review of Books, New York, New York*)

### 3rd Annual "Letters Are for Things" Art Festival

Usually a venue for celebrating marine wildlife, the New York Aquarium turns into the New York Abecedarium for one night annually. This year, *H is for Hawk's* Helen Macdonald presents The Lifetime Achievement Award to the novelist Sue Grafton (*T is for Trespass, U is for Undertow*). A VIP pass includes complimentary screenings of *Dial M for Murder* and *V for Vendetta*. The event is sponsored by Alphabet Inc. subsidiary Google; RSVPs to the event are not necessary as Google has predicted precisely who will attend. Note to parents: beware of bringing the youngsters, as this year's theme is *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*. (*New York Aquarium, 602 Surf Ave., Brooklyn*)

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# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Monstro's

245 E. 19th St. (212-736-3100)

ON A COLD November night, I found myself on Slacks Avenue, a neighbourhood on the north side of E. 19th Street, a former textile haunt, now dominated by the furniture industry, though many there continue, unwittingly, or unknowingly, using textile extensively, both on themselves, and in each establishment, and I, myself, in a bistro, a noshing nook, a restaurant, Monstro's, where the knife-slayed, wood-fire roasted lamb chops proved a worthy foe to my unsettled appetite, itself a controlling, yet benevolent, presence, always up to the challenges of being fed, as it was that night, set upon the chops, these cooked within an inch of success, teetering but falling just short, though happy to have hung on the edge for a moment at least, their cohorts, bevel-chopped, pan-seared Yukon Gold fingerlings, made to watch as the chosen protein gave way to my advances, the potatoes then finished in kind, survived by their over-wrought cousin, tortellini, a husky youth with a simple mind, lacking the delicacy of its older sibling, the well-dressed and attentive Turkish salad, who may have seen or heard ideas foreign to the younger starch, and who had escaped my gaze up to this point, its protective barrier of cow-child now removed, revealing a stockpile of greens and staled bread, cheeses and root veggies, all staring up to say "eat, captain" and so I did, set upon satisfaction as I was, finishing the appointed side with ease, leaving me then

only the aforementioned, the tortellini, a former triumph, now a detested replacement for a mightier linguini, a prettier spaghetti, a more significant rigatoni, all a proper choice for a diner such as anyone, though tonight this diner faced challenges rather than treats, the imposition of tortellini, and as I exhaled, announcing both my successful turn with the salad, as well as my campaign against the cooling circular doughs, I felt a feeling close to joy, which, for a moment, was beyond my calculations of potentials for the evening, though that emotion was then swiftly swayed by the onslaught of gluten discs, a painful challenge which, while undesired, put the meal in perspective, reminding me that with good must come bad, with cars must come accidental death, with Christmas must come pine smell, with planes must come improper destinations, such as Iceland or LAX, the former too small, the latter a one-star, dirt airport, both unlike Paris, oh Paris, the city of nights, a haven for love and reason and careful examination of oneself and any compatriots close enough to justify careful examination in addition to yours, then dinner with those who are worthwhile, or those who are not generally, but could be for the night, as many are capable of one night's joyous company, while few are capable of significant learning, as in the study of catalogues of ancient texts or of mathematics or of the anatomy of the earth's species, each similar in their coexistence on this planet, yet vastly different in their needs for survival, for success, for being cooked and consumed.

Monstro's is open at night.

—Matt Nelsen

## BAR TAB



### Garden Phil's

205 E. Houston St. (212-254-2246)

One step through the gate to the Garden and you're transported to the would-be backyard of your most green-thumbed cohort if effort came over them for long enough, a lush paradise with plump plants ready for picking, and eating. And eat them I did. And spit them out I did. These plants are not the plants I buy in the grocery store. A second step and you've bumped into one of the low, inviting tables, intimately strewn about the cozy forest tavern. Every ingredient used at Garden Phil's is grown in-house, ensuring fresh, in-season cocktails in a warm, humid, plant-friendly atmosphere. When asked about their offerings, namesake Phil Waters mutters, "the mint has really taken over...it's hard to tame." Mojitos, Mojitos, Mint Juleps! I order a Scotch & Mint, swat a nearby bee, and recluse myself to a table in the back. With my view mostly obstructed by forceful foliage, I couldn't help but track a young, Euro twenty-or-something sitting in one of the raised beds. Thoroughly, and apparently, enjoying the cocktails, he leans back with satisfaction, resting for a moment. And as I watch him relax, a vigorous up-growth begins around him. Once a seat, soon a dense crop of mint, then a wall of the stalky weed, the youthful imbiber absorbed completely, with a grace known only by a thicket such as this. I raised my drink to the departed, as I found myself tipping back into the greenery. End of the night. Part of the Garden. —Matt Nelsen

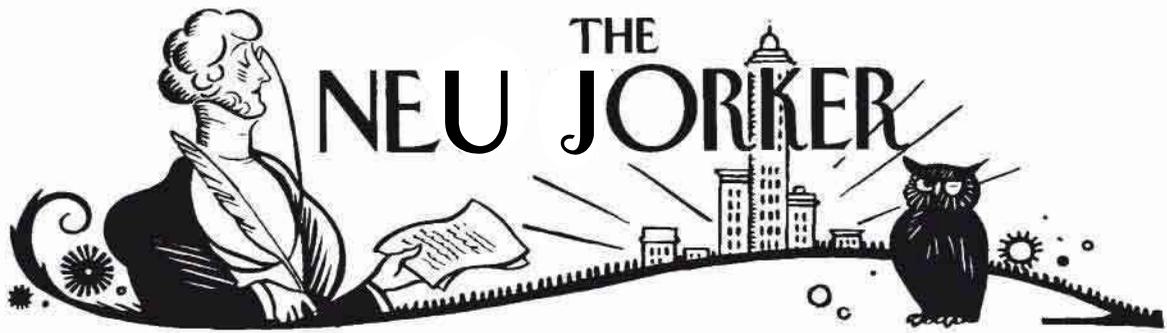


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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT  
GORE EASTER

FOR DECADES NOW, swelling rents and an eye-puncturing cost-of-living have done nothing to stem the tide of young people arriving in New York. It seems every college student with an ounce of self-determination and access to kayak.com will soon appear at LaGuardia or JFK with a duffel bag of dreams and the taste of big apple on their swollen lips. Indeed, recent polls of seniors at colleges in North America and Eürope paint just such a picture: 91 percent of students so polled declared their intent to move to New York within hours or minutes of graduation.

Many current New Yorkers are worried these newly arrived, desperate twenty-two-year-olds will make an already crowded job market no different than a crack across the cheekbone with half a cinderblock. But at City Hall, a disturbing trend among new arrivals is giving city planners a far greater concern.

In the 1960s young adults preferred to set up shop in the West Village. But as that area became more crowded, gentrified and (inevitably) expensive, the influx moved directly east to the relatively uninhabited East Village and Lower East Side. When those filled up, people moved yet farther east to Williamsburg. More and more young people are now signing their first leases in Bushwick, and that's what has city planners losing sleep. For as any subway map can tell you, Bushwick is east of Williamsburg.

"It's always east!" said Dr. Paul Caster, Mayor de Blasio's most trusted city planner and best friend. "East at an ever increasing rate. It looks like some sort of natural law." Caster's data analysis projects new arrivals rapidly overwhelming Bushwick and taking over Ozone Park and then South Jamaica by May of this year. With any luck the wave of mid-

twenties hopefuls will narrowly miss the runway at John F. Kennedy international, but eventually—Caster predicts Arbor Day of 2021—the crowd will spill into the ocean somewhere near Baldwin Harbor.

Deaths will be inevitable. "These young people don't have the body fat to stay afloat for even a day, let alone the two or three years it takes to establish a career and earn enough for a one bedroom in Cobble Hill," explains Dr. Karrah Webber, a nutritionist and swim coach who has consulted with city planners since 2011. "Imagine a house party in a shitty one bedroom two hundred yards offshore. People will drown! All the drugs will get wet!"

Soon, according to Dr. Webber, "the beaches will be choked with corpses. Not literally though since beaches can't breathe—that's impossible."

Impossible is right. Dozens of solutions to the problem have been put forward, but few seem likely to help. A Bushwick zoning plan to restrict new coffee houses, tattoo parlours and the like had the opposite of the desired effect; it seems an unlicensed "illegal" skateboard shop has even more appeal to a broke twenty-two-year-old Oberlin grad than a normal one.

Last year a ten-mile-long, 200-foot-high wall on Lefferts Boulevard, built from donated materials by terrified old people, was reviewed as a "cool hang-out spot with a super chill vibe" on Gothamist within days of its completion, and so many second-hand bicycles were chained to it in the ensuing week that it collapsed.

Most recently De Blasio's team enlisted Joey Bada\$\$, the popular twenty-year-old rap phenom from Bed-Stuy, to influence incoming renters using his vast social media presence.



But although Bada\$\$'s tweets, all 250 of which were variations on the phrases "The Bronx smells great again" and "OMG found a great deal on Ped Eggs in Astoria," were retweeted thousands of times, they do not appear to have had a significant impact anywhere (except at the decades-old non-profit organization Make The Bronx Smell Better, which now faces bankruptcy). And the whole program became an embarrassment for the city when it was revealed that Mr. Bada\$\$, rather than move away from Brooklyn to a more affordable locale, had willingly changed his name to Joey Bada\$.

Anne Semlick, a fifty-one-year-old flower shop owner in East New York, learned her home stands in the path of the juggernaut when police officers detained four Penn State grads fighting over an abandoned end table in her front yard. Mid-arrest, one of the young men asked Semlick if he could sleep under her porch for \$780 a month. After some hesitation, Semlick agreed.

Three months later Semlick is excited about the additional income—the spot under the porch now goes for \$1375, no pets—but her contact with young people has made their inevitable drowning in the Atlantic Ocean a problem close to her heart. Ms. Semlick organized several meetings at a nearby church to discuss the issue but was surprised to learn few of her neighbors shared her concerns. "Most people were mad their rents were going up, and they just wanted to know if there was a way all the new people could drown *before* they moved to New York." Half a dozen meetings later, the group continues to ignore Ms. Semlick's proposal to pass out arm floaties to everyone under twenty-five and is instead focused on "strangling," a new form of land-drowning.

Drowning is right: local contractors are now deluged with re-

quests by property owners to divide and redivide units into ever smaller living spaces, and this work is so profitable and simple that many other jobs are going undone. Ray Griffiths, a hedge fund manager in Manhattan who suffered a heart attack when he realized his new walk-in humidifier had been hastily sanded, is suing his carpenter but ultimately blames the eastward expansion's monopoly on skilled handymen. Griffiths, who is squash partners with Deputy Mayor Tony Shorris and who helped fund the William Amend Exhibition at the Met, is pressing hard to outlaw apartment subdivision in the five boroughs.

But Dr. Caster at city hall is aghast at the idea. "The creation of teeny tiny apartments from what were once very small apartments in what were once sausage warehouses and chemical plants is the only thing we have going for us," he explained. "If we can't cram miserable young adults into what are basically live-in bathrooms, it's just a matter of months before the wave of people landing in between Williamsburg and the ocean overwhelms every unit of housing we have left."

Left is right: as things now stand, the western side of the Atlantic ocean will soon be one big liquid cemetery for the world's hopeful youth. Caster, ever the optimist, does believe there is one strategy that could actually succeed at preventing the tragedy—temporarily re-classifying parts of Long Island as part of the State of New Jersey. But when whispers of that plan were first made public, real estate values plummeted so quickly in the affected areas that hundreds of homeowners rioted. Mayor de Blasio, in an electrifying secret speech made only to his fun video diary, vowed never to follow that plan.

Unlike in *Finding Nemo*, it seems this time the sharks will feast.

—Stephen Unckles

## THE CHILDREN'S DEPT. BOY UNINTERRUPTED



ON A RECENT afternoon that was neither particularly warm nor particularly cold, John English slid into a corner booth at Sardi's on West Forty-Fourth Street. His slight figure was emphasized by his choice of attire: an oversized cable-knit sweater, long khaki shorts, and well-worn topsiders. On a nearby wall amid caricatures of Broadway stars, local politicians, and a boxer or two, a sketch of English hung beside a portrait of the late actor Yul Brynner. English is known for many things—his chalk murals of Jane Jacobs on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village, his brief stint as a costume designer for an off-

off-Broadway production described in reviews as Tennessee Williams meets *Carousel*, and his letters to the editor of *The Paris Review*, in which he lambasted George Plimpton for being a poor dresser and all-around terrible hockey player—but he is perhaps best known for the title he has held since 1965: the Only Living Boy in New York.

"There have been other boys over the years," English said between bites of grilled cheese, a dish that does not appear on the restaurant's regular or children's menu. "But they usually die immediately." His long run as the sole boy in the five boroughs is both a source of pride and sadness. "I often wonder why I lasted and they didn't," he said softly before taking a gulp of milk. "I also wonder why I've never advanced past the age of 11."

English is now speaking publicly about his perpetual youth with *Real Live Boy*, a book that took nearly ten years to write. "It's hard when you can't

advance past a fifth-grade reading level," he said. "Can I play with your cell phone?" He shifted his attention back and forth between the dessert menu



John English

and a game of Minecraft. “I’d like all of it. You’re paying, right?”

Moments later a parade of waiters filled the table with plates of dessert and English surveyed the sweets, his legs dangling off the banquette. “My parents disappeared early on in my life,” he explained with the hard-nosed demeanor of someone whose parents had disappeared early on in his life. “I don’t blame them. Parenting in New York is already intense. Imagine the pressure of having the only living boy as your son. Not to mention all the resentment from the parents of the dead boys. It was just too much.”

And then there’s the song. “For years I tried to deny that it was about me. But when you’re the only living boy in New York, a song called ‘The Only Living Boy in New York’ is obviously about you. I got tired of people asking me if I really did get my news from the weather reports.” And did he? He crossed his arms, refusing to answer what he considered to be an inappropriate question.

When Simon and Garfunkel released the song in 1970, English enjoyed his period of celebrity before a depression set in. “Paul Simon was nice enough. He brought me an mbira from South Africa, but Art Garfunkel was a real prick.” He paused, looking around to see if anyone would scold him for his language before continuing: “They brought me out on stage one night in Chicago and Mr. Garfunkel whispered in my ear, ‘You’re not in New York anymore, freak.’ Who says that to an 11-year-old boy?” He shook the memory off and returned to a piece of coconut cream pie.

Despite his fame, or perhaps because of it, life has not been easy for English. There were opportunities for paid appearances after the song’s initial release and a bit of renewed interest after it was featured on the soundtrack of the 2004 film *Garden State*, but offers dried up following his inflammatory remarks about the movie’s star, Zach Braff. “He started it,” English insisted through a mouthful of hot fudge sundae. “And he had me blacklisted from the entertainment industry. I’d hoped to work as a child actor for the rest of my life.” He has not been able to support himself

with full-time work due to child labor laws and has had to rely on odd jobs and support from the New York Administration for Children’s Services, which has repeatedly tried to cut off his funding. “You’d think I’d be their poster child! They went to court claiming I was a drain on resources, but the judge said that they had to keep paying until I reached the age of 18, no matter when or if that happens.”

Sadly, English’s love life has also stalled. He has never married because he could not get the required consent of a parent or legal guardian. “It was mostly just puppy love,” he said of his past relationships. “Besides, girls are gross.” He’d considered moving to New Jersey, but the prospect of being among other young males was troubling. “It’s my entire identity. And One of Many Boys in New Jersey doesn’t have the same ring as the Only Living Boy in New York.” Still, a change of scenery might be in order. “Maybe Brooklyn,” he said as he headed for the door with a stack of carryout containers. “At least there I’d be around men who act my age.” Before climbing onto a silver Razor A3 Scooter, he turned around to answer one lingering question. “Of course that’s where I get my news. I’m 11. I don’t care about current events. I just want to know whether it’s going to be nice enough to play baseball. Or if school is closed. I also care about that.”

—Elizabeth Stamp

## MAN ON THE STREET POOPING IN PUBLIC



IT’S A COOL, clear day in February on the corner of Bowery and 2nd Avenue and Roger Klunkman is doing what he does best—defecating in the middle of the street. “I like this intersection—it’s a great place to squat. You get nice visibility from the buildings surrounding it.” Roger, 54, is not the type of man you’d expect to see at some of the edgier downtown intersections. 6’9” and no less than a thousand

pounds, he wears a full suit every day. The suits are custom made at a store in Downtown Brooklyn partially owned by Edward Norton. The tailor there, Ricky Bambino, knows Roger by name. “Roger has been coming to me for years—I sew detachable panels to the back of all of his pants, so he can easily pop one out on the street.” Ricky’s shop has been the site of countless odd tailoring requests—one man asked him to make a blazer for a snake. Ricky filled a pair of his wife Marla’s old pantyhose with dried beans and got to work cutting and sewing. The man picked up the order and then gleefully put the blazer on the boa constrictor wrapped around his neck, which then ate him right in front of Ricky’s eyes. But that didn’t phase Ricky, a former Navy Seal who has pole jumped in the Olympics, sang backup on several Beatles albums, and climbed Mount Everest. Oh, and he was an extra in *Annie Hall*. He’s so cool. Wouldn’t it be great if this piece was about him? But it’s not. It’s too late now. So back to Roger. Ugh.

Roger is a familiar site in Manhattan—locals mostly know him as “The Man Who Defecates in the Streets.” Last year he unloaded directly in front of Claire Danes’s Soho apartment. An errant teenager taped the event, and submitted it to PS1, where it was immediately accepted and placed in its own gallery. Danes herself went to the opening, dressed in brown—a nod to Roger’s work.

To watch Roger evacuate his bowels is like watching DiMaggio at bat—a delightful spectacle that most people don’t really care about at this point. First he walks up and down the block a few times—scoping out the exact right spot to make his mark. He’ll pass over a street if he finds too many grease spots or potholes. “DeBlasio hasn’t done much for city infrastructure, that’s for sure,” he quips as we approach the corner of Houston and Hudson. Once he finds his location, he circles it—twice. “The first time’s for luck, the second time’s just for fun.” Then he detaches his butt flap and gets to work.

Which raises the question... what happens when he just can’t go? “That’s my biggest fear. Noth-

ing coming out.” Richard shakes his head. “It’s all in the timing—first thing in the morning or right after lunch? I know that’s gonna be a successful day.”

Like any New Yorker, Roger has gotten a fair amount of quizzical looks over the years. Most Manhattanites don’t bat an eye, but the ritual baffles tourists. “I’ve had people want to take pictures with me. Me. Roger Klunkman from Bay Ridge! One time a guy just crouched next to me and started barking like a dog.” He also has faced a fair amount of injuries. “You see this?” He lifts his rear flap a little—an unmistakable tire tread scar. “Hit by a bicyclist in the middle of Eighth Avenue. But that one was worth it. It was a great shit.”

His hobby has also taken a toll on his personal life over the years. “My wife thinks what I do is crazy, just crazy—but I say, what do you prefer? That I sit around here bothering you? That gets her to stop yammering



Roger Klunkman

pretty quickly.” He grins, then spits a plug of tobacco onto a nearby pigeon. Manhattan isn’t Roger’s only stomping ground—he’s “gone” on the streets of four boroughs. “Yea, I do Brooklyn a lot, every now and then I’ll make it up to Ridgewood, and I have been known to hit some places in the South Bronx.” His companion wonders whether he’s considered Staten Island. He gives a knowing smile. “Oh no. The last thing Staten Island needs is *more* hot feces.”

—Langan Kingsley

## DEPT. OF WHICH-CRAFT? TOIL AND TROUBLE



ONE RECENT MORNING, sitting on a bench outside a cafe on the border of East-East Williamsburg, South Greenpoint and the up-and-coming neighborhood Dump Area, three new media-girl witches cradled cups of coffee and yelled out omnious prophecies at passing men.

Alanna Bishop, staff writer for a popular online magazine, came up with the idea for her coven to get together on mornings when they get to work from home, and to take their powers of augury to the streets. Said Alanna, 26 with lavender-pink hair: “everyone reads Tarot now, so we just wanted to do something different. And it’s fun to make up some stuff that isn’t just for Content. Though if we say anything particularly good, I do tweet it.”

The other witches joining her were Alana Doyle, a staff writer for a feminism website, and Ylana Eliot, a staff writer for a glossy magazine that comes out three times a year and costs \$50 an issue. Alana, who was wearing leggings printed with tiny Satans, explained that they posted the day’s prophesying location on their Woman Power Brunch secret Facebook group, and whoever is around will show up.

Ylana explained to a volunteer witch (me) that the only fortune-telling requirement was to say something bad would happen. “And make sure you’re targeting the right people—only men, and only people who believe in capitalism. Like that guy.” She gestured to a man wearing a collared shirt.

A stream of men passed and the witches tossed out some prophecies. “You will be CEO, but Fortune will run a cheesy photo of you on your motorcycle in a profile and the in-

ternet will turn you into a meme!” “You will devote your life to the capitalist-colonialist system, only to witness its inevitable downfall!” “You will... fall into a big hole in the ground,” said Alana, shrugging. She confided that when she can’t think of anything to say, she just yells that she is on her menstrual cycle.

As the morning commute slowed to a trickle, conversation turned to the current state of witchhood. “I hate when people say they aren’t witches,” said Ylana. “It’s like, hello, you’re on the wrong side of history!”



Alanna Bishop

“This is honestly a feminist act,” said Alanna, finishing the last of her coffee. “Men stand on the sidewalk and tell me to smile, make comments about my body all the time. This is the female version of that.” As a man ran by, she yelled after him: “The sports team you love most will lose a key player to a knee injury in the off-season!”

After about an hour, the witches spotted a tall woman with two Miley Cyrus-eqsue creature buns of platinum blonde hair—Alaina Choi, another member of the coven. “Something wicked this way comes!” yelled Alana. Responded Alaina: “Haha, it me.”

—Bythe Roberson

THE FINANCIAL PAGE  
TURN BACK THE CLOCK ON CHINA

NO COUNTRY IS born into the same disposition. Some come with an expanse of land, but poor exportable resources. Others have a substrate of petroleum, but pugnacious neighbors with differing ideas about God. Rarer still is the nation that enjoys true solitude, those lone desolate islands that are just a bit too 'native' for a Sandals Resort. But even they suffer from tribalism and its trappings, such as a dearth of language, forcing its people to express themselves through thigh-slaps and *coo-coo cah-choos*. These disparities are natural, and thus just. But others are man-made, and must be overcome through political might.

China lives in the future, with a booming tech sector, a beautifully stratified class structure, and a government that refuses to be handcuffed by eco-regulation. But they also *live in the future*—literally. In an age where regimes rise and fall in a day, and microseconds decide markets, we simply cannot allow our competitors to the east keep their 13+ hour advantage.

The solution isn't easy (is any?) but it's a one-time fix. What I'm proposing is simple: Every Sunday at 9 am local time, for forty-eight weeks, America will set their clocks back thirty minutes. At the end of this protean period, we'll find ourselves, once again, in the sweet spot of world leader—this time, in minutes.

Myopic assailants will be quick to rebut. They'll say that we'll have to be nocturnal for a good part of the year. That our economy will be rattled. That we'll have massive infrastructure overhauls. That China doesn't actually live in the future. But they're also refusing to acknowledge even the most salient advantages, such as cutting our air-conditioning costs. Plus, it'll be fun, like a nation-wide slumber party, where we really can't wake our neighbors to the east, because then they'll do the same thing, spurring a time travel arms race that would make *Marty McFly* (of the 80's and early 90's science-fiction adventure trilogy starring Michael J. Fox and, to a lesser extent, Christopher Lloyd) blush. This, of course, is the most difficult detail to iron out. How to keep a secret among a set of 320 million people from another set of 1.4 billion people?



The answer is whispering, and handwritten notes. Keep a piece of information completely analog and it simply can't travel across seas. To spread the word in a controllable way, we need to take a step back (when 'tablet' still referred to the Ten Commandments—ha!). In this brave new world, we'll ask all citizens to tell everyone they see about the new policy, but only once that person has provided proof that they're also a citizen.

Network science experts anticipate the entire process, starting with one person in the center of Times Square, will take somewhere between thirty and seven hundred minutes for the greater New York City area, and then another five to eighteen years for the rest of the country. It's not ideal. The problem is that there are citizens in the boonies—the fringes of Alaska, the corners of the Dakotas—that will simply be too far away to be reached. And that's where advanced squatter laws come in.

Squatter laws are straightforward and, like the concept of daylight savings time, something that already exists in our laws. Basically, if someone finds land unattended for a certain period of time, they can claim it is as their own. What I'm merely suggesting is shrinking the necessary vacancy period to one second. If you go to the store to get milk and come back to find a family of strangers preheating your oven, it's time to move on. It won't be long until we have a nation of drifters, stepping outside of their comfort zones, seeing their homeland with wide eyes and the thrill of

being uprooted without an end in sight, checking the IDs of everyone they see and then telling them our national secret.

And it will be a *national* secret. It's very, *very* important no one knows about this. Not even France, unless they *really* promise not to blab. I mean, we can tell India too. Norway? Too judge-y? Okay, no one.

There's nothing Washington loves to talk about more than limited resources: money, food, energy, housing, guns, rights, research. But the commodity that ties it all together is unlimited: time. So concentrated on 'the present' are we that we fail to see its malleability, that we can create our own definition of it, just like we've done with 'democracy' and 'equality.' With the backing of a unified Congress, and the support of a nation of whispering, note-passing vagabonds, it's time to step out of the past, and into the future.

—Andrew Lipstein

Behind the world we know  
lies a secret history  
of incredible stories  
that have the power  
to change everything.  
Or at least around  
60% of things.  
65% tops.

# Ballpark

*The counterintuitive  
history of the power of  
guesstimates*



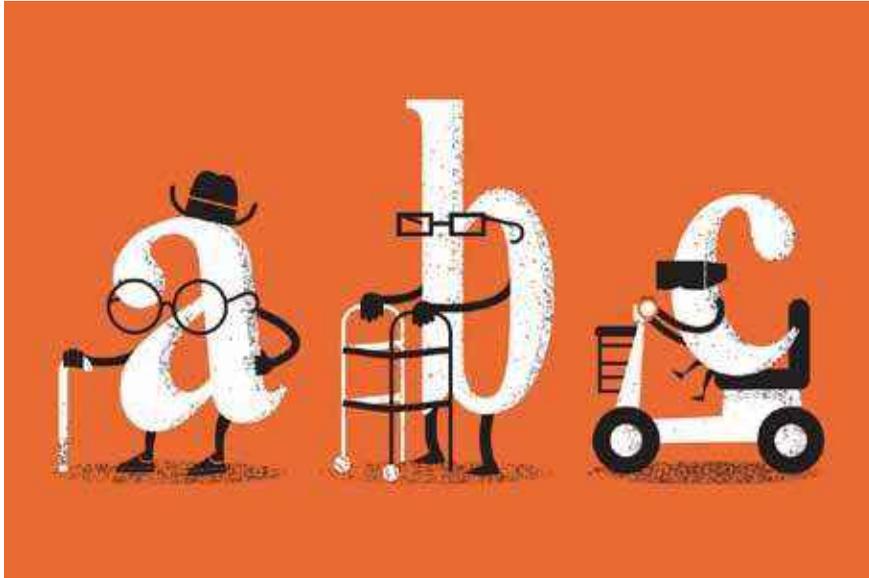
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# TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF HUMOR WRITING

BY BLYTHE ROBERSON



1. Why am I writing in this style?

(a) 45 years ago I came up with the idea to use a multiple-choice format as a humor piece and I vowed to never try to think of another way to make jokes

(b) I am not funny

(c) In 2005 a witch put a spell on me that caused me to forget what “comedy” is

2. Why does anything I say about young people seem like it was written by an alien whose entire knowledge of humanity comes from one episode of *Broke Girls*?

(a) I am old and white and I assume anyone younger than me is a frivolous idiot

(b) I read a *New York Times* trend piece about young people wearing pocket watches and I assume that pretty much sums it up

(c) I know a lot about young

people! I have three daughters who are 7, 5, and 3 years old and they are all named Caroline

3. What now?

(a) Something about how women are ugly, old sluts?

(b) Something about fat people being gross?

(c) A joke about New Jersey?

(d) Something about Native Americans, for no other reason than I want to be culturally tone deaf and I have never met a person of color in my life or even one woman not named Caroline?

4. What is the most relevant thing I can think of?

(a) *50 Shades Of Grey*

(b) Miley Cyrus

(c) The TV show *Felicity*

(d) “Call Me Maybe”

5. I think “Call Me Maybe” is hilarious because I don’t know that Carly Rae Jepsen’s new album is:

(a) Lit

(b) Bae

(c) “it me”

(d) AF (as fuck)

6. If I tried to make it in comedy now, in 2016, I would:

(a) Not be successful, because even though I am a privileged white man I am not funny

(b) Have a Twitter where I tweet monologue jokes at the *Tonight Show* every night and within two months I would be hired

7. Why does anyone do anything differently than me???

(a) They must be poor

(b) They must be weird

(c) Literally anything that anyone does is too strange for me because I spend all day sitting in an ecru room on a tan sofa while my wife Caroline and my three daughters Caroline Caroline and Caroline make crudité for me to eat while I watch a foutboul game gooooo Paytan Mannana

8. Why is there so little of my personality in these pieces?

(a) I have no personality

(b) I am actually a computer program designed to write jokes but I was coded back in the ’80s before anyone really knew how computers worked

(c) I do have a personality but it is very bland and if you met me in person this is exactly how I would be: Bad

9. True or false: I am so hateful because I am always exhausted from making sure absolutely no jokes slip into my humor pieces

**Answer:** False. I am so hateful because I wish I had come up with the idea of doing a bad rip-off of *The Onion*, but someone beat me to it

10. Why is this piece still going?

(a) Because I am a white man, no one has ever told me anything I have ever done is bad

(b) I am a millionaire probably

(c) I actively hate the readers of *The New Yorker*

## FINDING MY GALLOP

*The equine, the exquisite*

BY NICOLE SILVERBERG

**M**Y JOURNEY AS a horse begins, strangely, in the middle.

In 2007, as I approached my fortieth birthday, I felt an unprecedented sense of failure. My husband, Andrew, and I had been married over ten years, had two beautiful daughters, and a house staff of five. I was in terrific physical health and owned a business, yet I felt a daunting pang of discomfort during the most mundane of daily tasks: lowering myself into a car, taking a bite of my half-grapefruit breakfast, drying myself with a towel—even when reading to my youngest daughter, Genna.

The very nature of a parasite is its clandestine takeover, and so it was with my dreams of another, more complete life. At first it was just a glister of desire, so small I hardly noticed. But over many years it became the elephant in the room—and it was a loud elephant. The elephant was screaming.

Alas, I longed to become a horse—not necessarily in identity, but certainly in behavior—a confession that earned more than its fair share of scoffs. “Only horses are horses,” I heard from many friends as they looked past me, fearful of eye contact. As if becoming a horse is any more impossible than my girlfriends’ quest for eternal youth!

I’m quite aware of the reputation horses have earned in modern society: majestic in the wild, persecuted in the cities, but always odd-toed ungulates. Yet to me it was simple: while I have never been any good at sports or the arts (no matter how many times my father put a squash racket in my hand or my mother put ballet shoes on my feet!) I’ve always loved horses very deeply. Racing like a horse seemed like a natural evolution, a way of honoring the main constant in my life—and to have some fun! This wasn’t a mid-life crisis. And I wasn’t about to take no for an answer.

Andrew and I have a unique, special marriage in which nothing is off limits. This has led to a fair share of embarrassing run-ins (you try explaining to your in-laws why, in a feat of lovemaking, you entirely de-tiled their bathroom!) but also affords a safe space of discussion that has saved the house from arson on at least three occasions.

And so, when I finally told him of my ambitions—to become what I’d always idolized, to gallop and trot, to become a horse, and a damn good one at that—he listened.

**I** CANNOT REMEMBER the first time I saw a horse. Growing up in the cowboy terrain of Arizona, they seemed to be a part of the landscape, as natural as the purple mountains or rigid saguaros that dotted the skyline. Beyond the wash behind my house was a small, private ranch, and on clear days I could peer over my back wall and see the thick chocolate burrito bodies of my equine amigos.

From clothing to framed paintings to stuffed animals (whose yarn mane I would raggedly brush with my own comb), my childhood was almost entirely populated with these companions. They held a particular addictive magic no other doll or toy train could match. I would sit for hours in our ornate playroom, stroking my little horsies with the tenderness and love a nanny gives to the child she cares for.

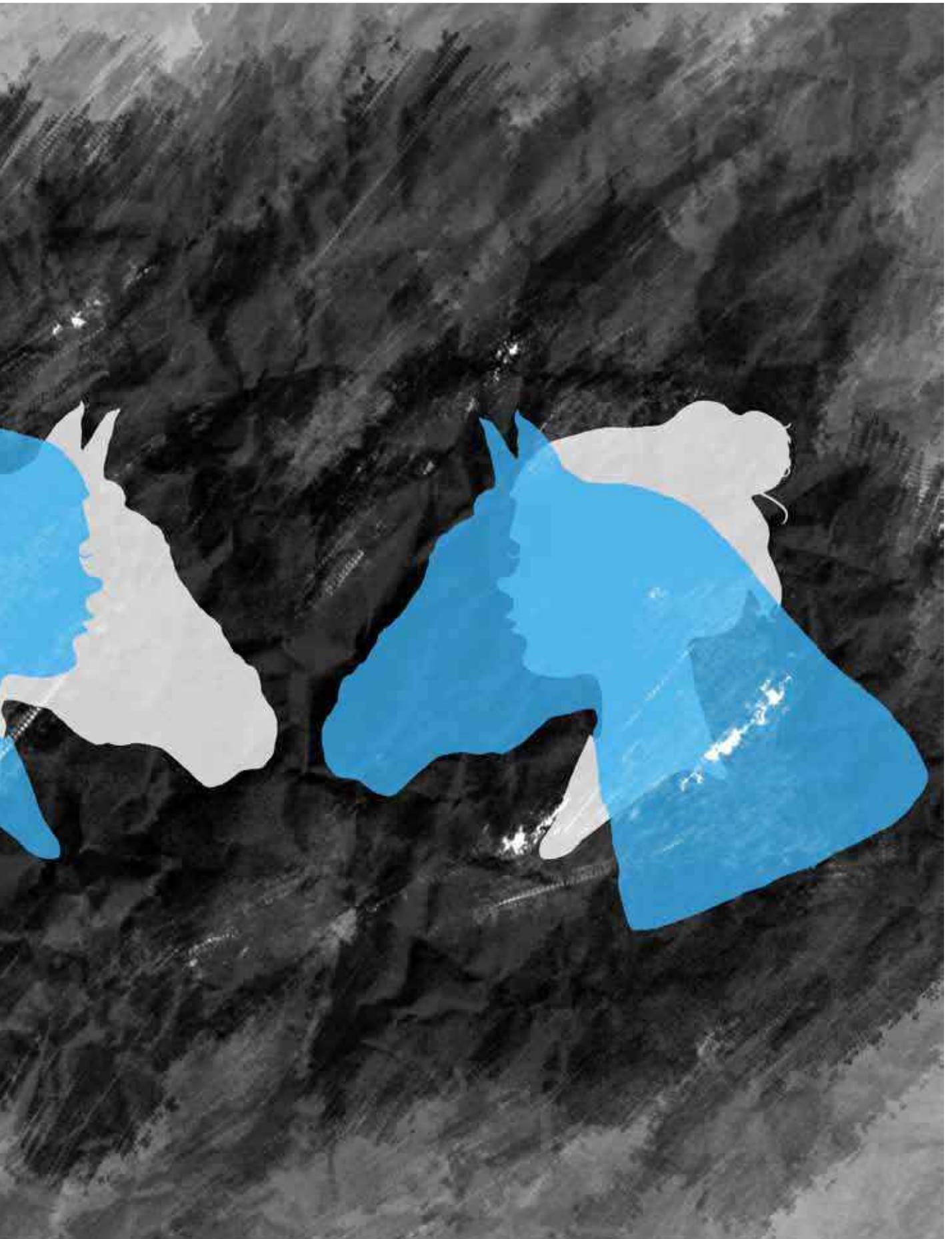
Other horse lovers of my youth took pleasure in riding or grooming the beautiful beasts, but however many times my father took me to the stables, I couldn’t quite bring myself to make physical contact. A pensive, sensitive child, I felt overwhelmed when confronted face-to-face with their majesty. Who could blame a delicate girl like myself? After all, horses are quite tall.

Instead I was mesmerized by



*The author went on a quest that was*

IMAGE BY JAMES FOLTA



*truly her own. There were costs, but it was a journey to which she could not say 'nay.'*

horses in competition, elite and sleek. That seemed to me to be a special life: to be groomed and bet on, like a beautiful woman. I'd play out these competitions with my figurines time and again. It was an intensely private part of my childhood. Sometimes my play would be silent and I'd hold the winning horses in my lap, or if they were small enough, in my mouth.

When I was eleven, my family moved to the east coast to be closer to my ailing grandfather. Horses became a symbol of the life I was forced to abandon. Is that a child's perception or the unmarred truth of a spry mind? I consider this often over yoga.

For years after moving east, I'd gallop around the house, ask my younger sister to sit on my back and attempt to leap over the small bronze Degas sculptures our parents let us play with. I'd ask for punishment when I failed, and for carrots and sugar cubes when I succeeded.

I have become obsessed with this image of myself as a girl, tentative in action but aggressive in passion. It's a poor imitation of my father—but then again, my father was inimitable.

"Bend it to your will," he used to say to me when he tucked me in once a year. This is perhaps an unconventional message to relay to a young girl, but my father was an unconventional man. He fiercely protected that which he loved: his family, his business, and his antique collection of hospital bedpans. He was very charming, and not very considerate.

His willpower is legendary in my family. It is an oft-told story at holidays that, on the day of his wedding to my mother, a record-breaking late spring snow storm was to hit upstate New York, burying my mother's estate beneath 40 inches of snow—not exactly the clear-skied, floral event of which she had dreamed. The night before the wedding, the sky already turning to a deep foreboding slate, my father ran into the meadow behind the house barefoot and furious. No one knows exactly what he said, but within two hours the clouds had cleared, and the next day the outdoor wedding bloomed perfectly into being. You may doubt the proposed causality

of the story, but to do so is to doubt my father—something I refuse to do.

It would not be until he passed away that I began to understand what "bend it to your will" truly means.

"It" is whatever you need it to be, and "your will" is your will. Could it be that simple?

**H**ORSE RACING HAS been around since the times of Ancient Greece; horses have been around even longer. Once I graduated from university, I did what so many ambi-



tious yet underprepared graduates do: I reverted to childhood. I didn't move back in with my parents, but I did take over a small four-bedroom apartment they held in Manhattan, and couldn't help but feel idiotic for how small my life seemed. I became obsessed with horse races—not betting money, but learning everything I could about the jockeys, the horses, the different track surfaces, and the derbies. If my love for elite horses had gone dormant over the four years I was immersing myself in Latin, literature, and cheap champagne, it was awakened now.

Horse racing is, at its core, one of the simplest competitions in existence. Though the particulars and traditions change from country to country, all horse racing determines one thing: What horse is fastest over a fixed distance?

The most common type of racing is "flat racing," in which the horse ridden by a jockey gallops on a track or between two points to test its speed and stamina. Tracks can be as short as 400 meters and as long as 2.5 miles, though the most famous derbies usually test a distance of 1 or 1.25 miles.

In the United States, these races are mainly designed for Thoroughbreds.

The birth of North American horse races was Salisbury, New York (now the Hempstead Plains of Long Island), in 1665. The two biggest competitions in the country are the famous Kentucky Derby, held on the first Saturday of May in Louisville, and the Preakness Stakes, held two weeks later in Baltimore.

I attended my first Kentucky Derby the year after college, taken by my then-boyfriend who was something of Tennessee royalty. His family had attended the Kentucky Derby since its inception, and to join them was nothing short of a pre-marriage ritual to test my compatibility.

Beneath the brim of my hat (which had barely arrived in time from France the night before) I could see my boyfriend's mother, as majestic as the horses themselves. Thin and sinewy, she was an agile woman, darting from person to person to make sure the social equilibrium was maintained. I could see how an eager first-timer swept up in the moment could mistake her for a horse, assuming she was there for competition.

Inevitably, the weekend did not go as well as planned. Perhaps I was too distracted by the races, the horses springing from their places and shooting like bullet stars past us. Or perhaps I did mount my boyfriend's mother, or ask her to mount me. How the mind decays as we age! All I know is in the car back from the airport, I turned to my boyfriend and knew it was over. "It's over, isn't it?" I remember saying to him. He replied with a nod: it was over.

Many years later I would run into him, once again at the Kentucky Derby. I was married to Andrew by then. He told me his mother, the beautiful horse-like woman who had ushered me into the world of elite races, passed earlier that year of cancer. That night I neighed at my reflection in the mirror: a small gesture for such an important woman.

**I** TURNED twenty-five the fall of 1992, when the country was bubbling in anticipation of the presiden-

tial election. Andrew was stationed in Iowa to work on the campaign, and I felt lonely and idle waiting for his return.

In those days, print newspapers still reigned supreme, and on weekday mornings I would walk around my Upper West Side block to pick up the smaller local publications, saying hello to the regular doormen on my street. (Is friendliness a lost pastime?)

One particular morning I was combing through the classifieds section of the paper on the hunt for a good hoot. I had been clipping the most unusual bits from the paper for months to assemble into a small scrapbook to give Andrew upon his return. Sure, some husbands would rather have the gift of American football tickets, but what can I say? We're intellectuals.

One autumn morning I found a curious ad that read: "WANTED: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FOR HORSE ROLEPLAY." I was horrified, but intrigued. What could it mean?

I put the paper away, but over the next several days, my mind kept returning to the ad. I was afraid the role-play was sexual or unsafe; I had heard horror stories from girlfriends about being brought to "interactive" theatre pieces in seedier parts of the city. Yet the word "research" had me hooked. Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved research almost as much as I've loved horses.

Perhaps I was afraid to admit to myself that however much information I had gathered about horse racing, there was still an element that felt entirely unattainable: the feeling of being the horse. Being a research participant in horse role-play would fill in some of the gaps—or at least connect me to someone who could.

I called the number from the paper and, to my surprise, was met with a warm female voice on the other end. "I'm calling in regard to your horse-play ad," I said, so nervous I was already mixing up my words.

"When are you available?" the voice on the other end said. "We have sessions on Tuesday and Thursday nights."

I was overwhelmed. What hap-

pened in the sessions? Who exactly was I speaking to?

"Are you still there?" the woman asked gently. "The sessions last an hour, tops. It pays \$20 cash. You don't have to bring anything, just wear close-toed shoes."

Before I knew it, I was writing down an address, having hardly said five words over the phone. I looked up the address in the phonebook and was surprised to see that it belonged to a psychology lab at New York University. Maybe the mystery voice wasn't out to get me after all.

When I arrived the following Tuesday night, I was surprised to see not an open space or a mock pasture, but a set of cubicles, each containing a computer monitor. I was led into a cubicle and handed industrial-looking goggles. It was explained to me that graduate students were studying herd mentality, and that my goggles would adjust my depth perception. The experiment involved looking at different photos of herds and pressing different letter keys on my keyboard depending on my instincts. It was terribly boring.

When I emerged from my cubicle nearly an hour later, I felt dejected. I had learned nothing from the "herd mentality exercise" except that my fingers were sore. I made a mental note

to book a deep tissue massage; for the disappointment alone, I'd earned it.

I was halfway out the door when I remembered something curious; I turned back to the proctor.

"Why did you say I needed to wear close-toed shoes?" I asked, with maybe a bit more bite than I intended.

"Randomly selected participants also have to operate a foot pedal," the bespectacled girl squeaked. "Not you, obviously."

I stomped out of the room, feeling personally attacked. Why had this research project advertised itself so vaguely? Why couldn't they research something I was truly interested in? And why was I so disappointed? It made little sense.

In the weeks after the lab, I started doing research to see if there was a service like what I had been hoping the experiment would be. I wanted someone to teach me how to embody a horse so that I could, in my spare time, find personal enjoyment through galloping and maybe one day compete. I had difficulty finding an instructor, but I realize now that this was a pivotal moment for my passion and me.

Before I knew it, Andrew returned from Iowa, and a week after that we became engaged. With wedding plans, the horse dream would have to wait.



"Crab? Like the animal?"

**B**Y THE TIME I was pregnant with our first daughter, Mattalia, Andrew and I had started living upstate more than half the year.

When speaking to my best friends in the city, I would feign frustration at the lack of culture and activity in our new rural home, but in truth I appreciated the calmer lifestyle, simpler people, and the opportunity to have quiet time with my husband before the baby came. Besides, anyone will tell you July in Manhattan is not the ideal place to have swollen ankles and a small bladder, no matter how nearby your driver is.

Throughout my pregnancy, I recalled a pregnant mare that had lived on the neighboring ranch when I was a child. I watched that horse obsessively, in awe of how spry she continued to be throughout her pregnancy. A horse does not “bag up” (start to show) until the final month or so of her gestation. Certainly mares are tender or sensitive to their foaling, but it seemed minimal compared to what I was going through. I couldn’t help but laugh when I realized that I felt jealous of pregnant horses. (Though I’d like to stay thin until the last month I must admit, the human nine-month pregnancy is far preferable to the nearly year-long equine one!)

Nevertheless, my pregnancy was healthy and I was continuing life as

normal. Upstate, I had started my own business: a small artisanal soap company to benefit cow sanctuaries (a bit of irony, to be sure) and I felt an incredible sense of purpose. The company, cleverly called Milk Soap, was run out of our spare barn.

I would spend hours watching the soap being poured into molds, inhaling the natural scents of our organic masterpieces. It was quite soothing. I had a feeling of arrival in my life; I had somehow achieved a life as prosperous and satisfying as the one my grandparents had, and to make it more special, it was in the same region of the country as they had lived.

After Mattalia was born, I entered a state of bliss. Gone were my petty concerns of being the best liked in my social circle, or even the important concerns, like wearing the most fashionable outfits. I was completely content to just sit with my wet nurse and Mattalia. Everything felt destined.

Three years later, my second daughter was born. It was a difficult pregnancy for me, Andrew, and our surrogate. But on a special rainy autumn night, Genna was born, and our family was complete.

I never had a sister, but Andrew had four and was close with three of them. I’m grateful for the friendship and sisterhood they’ve extended to me, and the example they’ve set for

my daughters. Andrew’s oldest sister Elizabeth still lived in the city and I loved to visit her. Elizabeth is a thin, spindly woman with muted blonde



hair and soft features. She’s a living wisp of smoke, enchanting and elusive. Her penthouse is full of classical portraits of various pets—an eclectic take on the Greco tradition all of Andrew’s family adores.

It was in her study that we were tasting wine and daydreaming about the warm weather coming our way. The girls were three and six at the time and were on a vacation with Andrew. I think it’s important for girls to have alone time with their father to develop an independent bond.

In a few months the school year would end and the girls would go away for a special summer enrichment program. I couldn’t believe how quickly they were growing up, but felt excited for the independence I’d regain. Genna was a vicious little tyke, with a particular knack for biting and climbing, (“We both know where she gets that from!” I’d joke to Andrew with a jab.)

I was telling all this to Elizabeth when something came over me. Before I could stop myself, I confided in her about my side project: my own authentic attempts to horse race.

I had great love for Milk Soap, but that was work and I had been looking for play (beyond what Andrew could give me!). All my friends had hobbies that I found terribly boring. I’d accompanied them to so many inane book clubs, tennis lessons, swim retreats, wine tastings, ceramics classes, cheese monger tutorials, investing seminars, and one ill-advised hour of hypnosis therapy, that I was worried



*“If I were you I’d be very careful before I said something I thought was funny.”*

it wasn't the hobbies that were the problem, but that it was me! But that couldn't be.

At that point, I was giving Mattalia piggyback rides down the hallways at her constant request. To my surprise, I found greater joy in that than I had in any of my attempts at a hobby, and it wasn't the joy of parenthood: it was the love of having the weight of a small child on my back. Soon I was experimenting with the form. At first, I'd try to hold her on my back while I moved on my hands and knees, trying to propel us forward, but Mattalia kept tumbling off and knocking into the walls.

I tried various ways of strapping her to my back and holding my own weight before landing on a sustainable arrangement. Wrapping my knuckles in masking tape for padding and putting my back weight on the balls of my feet, I was able to position Mattalia on the small of my back and carry her for several yards at an impressive speed. Mattalia laughed and laughed but I didn't care. I was thriving.

I wanted to share it with someone besides Andrew. Of course Andrew would enjoy the sight of me with my rump in the air but what would an outside eye make of it? Secretly I wanted permission from someone to pursue this—my new hobby—more seriously.

Whether it the wine or the giddiness that led me to show Elizabeth, I'm not quite sure. But I downed the rest of my glass and offered to show her my new "trick"—an impersonation (in a sense) of a racing horse. Elizabeth agreed, cackling at the image of a stunning, lithe woman like myself lowering myself to the floor. But when I started galloping, Elizabeth's reaction turned almost solemn. I panicked.

"Do you like it?" I asked. "Of course, it's not as good as the real thing. But do you think it's authentic?" I was surprised by the insecurity in my voice. Elizabeth erupted in unreadable laughter.

"Sure it's authentic, honey. It's also freaky," she exclaimed. The word "freaky" sounded uncomfortable in her mouth. It wasn't a compliment. I love

## WHITE SPACE

Finally, on this page. Blankness.  
Margins. The rest of the magazine

so dense with packed columns, but  
here, at last, somewhere to write down

the name of that Pilates studio  
on the Upper West Side with the all-Dire Straits

playlist, or the phone number for a play-centric  
babysitter for Caleb and the other one, or

just space to draw a serpent winding its way  
through the stanza breaks which

you don't know why they are where  
they are. But you can give the serpent

some sick stripes and maybe make  
it breathe fire. And fill in the background

with 3D boxes and lightning bolts. Take up  
every last square inch. You can always stay

home with the kids and play "Sultans of Swing" on  
repeat while doing crunches on the floor

—Chris Michael Shea

compliments, and had wanted one.

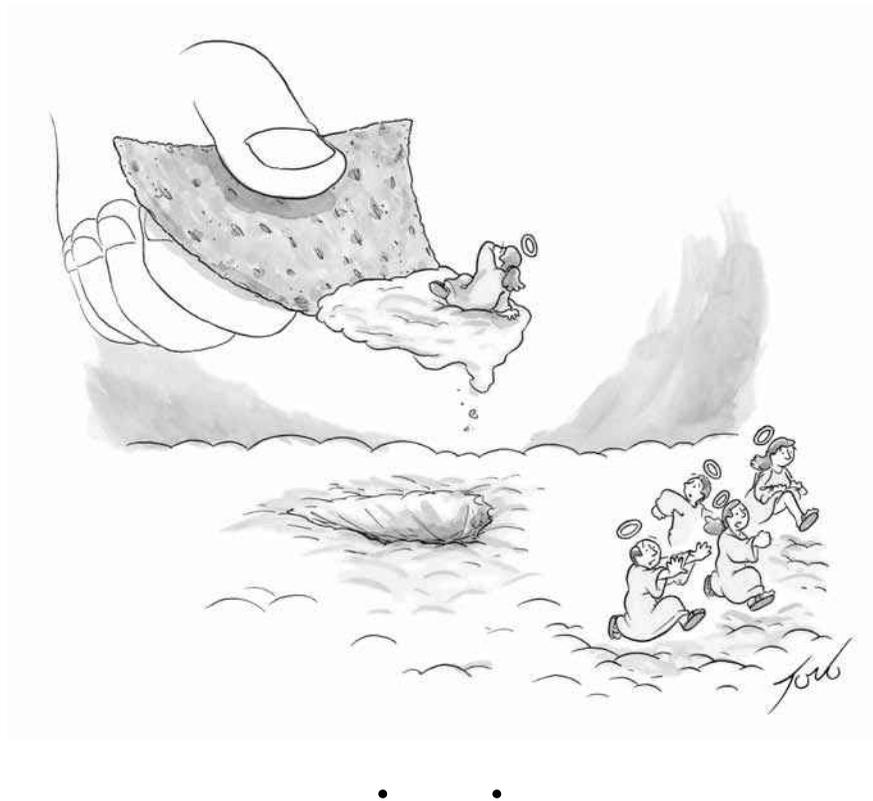
"Let's get you a glass of water to bring you back to Earth," she said as she rose from her armchair and glided into the kitchen to chastise a maid. I brushed the dust off my knees and went to the restroom to freshen up. I wasn't humiliated; I was determined. I felt like all the women I'd ever looked up to as they described facing adversity. I knew my gallop was worth something. This was going to be more than a hobby; it was going to be a lifestyle.

AS WITH ANY competitive athlete, my life began to take shape around my practice. I purchased four Thoroughbreds to put in our spare spare barn (built in case Milk Soap

should ever expand) and spent a great deal of time studying them. The horses' previous owners had trained them for racing, and so I hired the famous former jockey George Bush to ride the horses and keep them active.

Eventually, George Bush became a part of the family. The girls adored watching him ride, Andrew enjoyed his jokes, and I was summoning the courage to ask him to train with me.

I was still keeping the hobby secret from most of my friends after my demonstration to Elizabeth. I had tested the waters with several women in my circle, but they didn't take me seriously. Is it the modern war on sincerity that prevented them from believing in me? I don't know. I couldn't



help but feel like I was being punished for my creativity.

George Bush was a strange little man with a tendency to start every sentence with the phrase “Quite frankly.” His jockey career had ended after allegations of stealing from his employer, but I’d been keeping a close eye on the horses’ bank accounts and nothing seemed askew.

I had been subtly trying to gauge George Bush’s interest, but the man wouldn’t reveal a thing. I knew I had to ask him straight.

“I’d like to learn how to race,” I said to him one night when I was visiting the barn to check on the beauties. “Would you be willing to train me?”

“Quite frankly, I’m not sure what you mean,” George Bush said to me, raising his brow. “You’re no horse.”

I thought I was going to boil over. I was so sick of being confronted with not being a horse. Was Serena Williams born a tennis player? Of course not! She was born a baby and she learned a set of skills. My father had always maintained that passion and determination could open any door as long as you had money to back it up.

I’d lived my entire life under the umbrella of that philosophy, and I wasn’t going to depart from it or give up just because someone else hadn’t gotten the memo.

I offered George Bush double pay and explained my need to him. My boredom with the “normal” activities that had been afforded to me (as a woman!) simply wasn’t enough. Surely he could understand that. We made the first appointment to train. I was so thrilled that I read bedtime stories to both my daughters that evening.

**I** WAS PRETTY decent starting out, but was nothing compared to what George Bush was used to. For the first several weeks, I engaged in a series of tests, measurements, and exercises that left my body ragged and exhausted at the end of every day.

Andrew would carry my limp body to the tub and help me bathe. “No one’s making you do this,” he’d coo to me. But he was wrong. I was making myself.

In little time, I was in the best shape I’d ever been in my life. My thin bony legs were now enveloped in a lean layer of muscle, and my back was

etched with definition. I didn’t even mind that I’d put on 3.2 pounds. To my surprise, I could pick up Genna if for some reason I wanted to!

Yet certain challenges felt insurmountable. For example, the very existence of my collarbone was troubling. Horses’ forelimbs are connected directly to the spinal column by impressive muscles and ligaments. No surgery or physical therapy can correct this in humans. Furthermore, my knees were all wrong. Horses’ “knees” are more akin to a human wrist, comprised of carpal bones. How was I to fully compete with horses without these basic biological attributes?

These differences were agonizing and at times tempted me to throw in the towel. Had any athlete faced this type of adversity? It was unlikely. Yet I took inspiration from their stories, reading biographies of athletic icons, hoping to absorb resilience through the pages as Andrew slept beside me.

What I lacked in anatomy, I strived to make up for in authenticity. One of the more challenging aspects of those earlier days was internalizing a horse’s four-beat gait. Before George Bush came into the picture, I was galloping in two parts: my arms together followed by both legs. But horses move in a four-part sequence: left hind leg, left front leg, right hind leg, right front leg. It comes intuitively to horses, but it did not, frustratingly, to me. As the legs leave the ground, a horse is supported alternately laterally and diagonally, using slight head adjustments for extra balance.

The missing puzzle piece was discovered one night when I was having a steam before bed. It had been a particularly stressful day—Genna had accidentally swallowed a diamond, small but of great sentimental value. As I wrapped my hair up in my towel it occurred to me... perhaps if I were to wear a weighted headpiece, my balance could be improved.

The next morning I shared this with George Bush, who was elated. He rarely gave me strange looks anymore.

“Quite frankly, we could weight other parts of your body for accuracy as well,” he said. Seven weeks later I had my horse suit.

The suit was still a prototype then, and wasn't nearly as fashionable or organic as I'd have liked. But from the moment I put it on, I felt positively ferocious.

I was only able to devote a few hours every couple days to my new hobby of horsemanship, and as much as I wanted to give more, I felt guilt about prioritizing it. I didn't want to leave Andrew with an unfair share of the parenting or staff control. So many other mothers have commiserated with me on this very same dilemma—the desire to be the perfect mother and wife, but the need to answer a different, perhaps higher, call.

And, on top of all that, we were still spending several months a year at our place in Manhattan. Genna was enrolled in two kindergartens (one upstate and one in the city) in order to allow us freedom to travel. Mattalia, now nine, was on a fast track to becoming an Olympic skier, and would go to Italy and Switzerland for months at a time to spend time on the slopes.

We were proud of Mattalia, who clearly possessed a warrior's spirit. Brilliant, athletic, and resourceful, our sweet girl was conquering the world. I wanted to be just like her, and couldn't help but notice the irony that my pursuits to emulate her meant that I could not be present to support her. She'd started calling me "Mommy Nanny" and the nanny "Nanny Mommy." Could I live with that?

Every time I pushed forward with my horse work, I was inevitably missing dinner or a parent-teacher conference or a qualifying Olympic trial. I was frustrated and felt, for the first time in my life, quite lonely. Wasn't I entitled to a life of bliss and purpose? Yes, I had a family and a business and homes, but that hardly mattered.

Then my father fell ill.

**W**E BELIEVE OUR parents are immortal until, suddenly, they're proving to us that they're not. Such was the case with my father, who had retired to London a decade earlier. I missed him when he moved away, but was impressed by the active and cultured life he was leading abroad. It isn't helpful to dwell on regrets, but I

do wish I had made a greater effort to see him more than once or twice a year. We were overseas for Mattalia's skiing with some regularity, but the inescapable minutiae often won out over an extra week's travel to see him.

When I got the call that he was ill, I was half-dressed getting ready for a Milk Soap gala. I remember looking back in the mirror and realizing how beautiful I looked. It felt like a tribute to my father, to carry the genes he passed on to me with such poise. I like to think he'd say so, too.

By the time we arrived in London three days later, he did not have much time left.

I never spoke to my father about my horse hobby, but as I sat with him at his bed (at the very lovely British hospital that provided his care), watching him channel his youth by swiping and grabbing at the beautiful nurses caretaking for him, he seemed to know on some deeper level that I was on the brink of something important—even vital.

When he took his last breath, I made a vow to myself that I would live his legacy as best I could. To "bend it to my will," as he so often said.

Later that night, I spoke with Andrew about my epiphany.

"If anything, doesn't this mean you should reinvest in your family?" Andrew asked, brushing my hair. "I know the girls miss you. Or at least I

think they do."

As much as I had been denying it, Andrew was correct. If I was going to do this, I was going to need my family by my side.

The next day, I flew Mattalia home from Europe and informed her that she would be taking a yearlong break from her skiing trials, no matter the impact. I withdrew Genna from her Manhattan school. The entire family would be settled upstate year-round for me to pursue my horse hobby full time with them by my side. But that meant one final thing needed to be done.

I shut down Milk Soap, letting everyone in the company go. Horses don't own businesses, and so neither would I.

My life had moved from a canter to a gallop, and it was time to race.

**T**HOUGH I HAD been informally racing the Thoroughbreds in our barn for over a year, the time had come for a real competition to showcase my skills. This had become more than a hobby to me; it was a side career.

We had built a track behind the spare spare spare barn (for the horses in case the now defunct Milk Soap had wanted to expand), and hired two more jockeys to work under George Bush. We set the date of the race, and got working.

The event was years in the mak-



ing, but I still had great work to do. For months I trained, perfecting my form and pushing myself to the brink of physical ability. Before I knew it, two months had passed, and the race was upon us.

It was a Sunday morning race, and I had hardly slept the night before. It was to be a mostly private event, attended by a few of the kids' friends and some neighbors who were interested in the fuss. I was glad to have an audience, but focused on what was most important. This was about me. Would I succeed? Could I?

In previous trials, I was able to beat the oldest horses, but often lost to the more experienced racers.

"Quite frankly, it's not your fault." George Bush would say to me, and I knew he was right. But I wanted to win to prove to everyone—Elizabeth, friends, my father, Andrew, myself—that this was time well spent.

I zipped myself into the newest version of my horse suit, a functional work of art. A childhood friend was now an industrial couture designer in Paris, and had offered to improve upon the first version for me. Made of velvet and purified dirt with burlap and gold leaf accents, the suit was nothing short of divine.

As I trotted out to the track, I made eye contact with George Bush: my mentor, my leader, and my jockey. I approached him for a final brush. I took the groom as an opportunity to focus. Then it was time for the mount.

I could feel the weight of George Bush on my back and as I stretched my legs, I felt all human thought fly out of me. I was no longer a mother, husband, and horse hobbyist—I simply was the horse. I felt a deep connection with my surroundings from my fellow competitors to the ground I scraped my hoof against. I knew that I had finally ascended into a humble self-actualization.

I thought the race would be a blur of adrenaline, but I was hyperaware of every moment. I could feel the motion of my legs, the pattern of my gallop, all as natural as breath itself. I was possessed by the intense ambition that had guided me to that moment, and I placed second of fifth!

I was as elated as I was exhausted, and I was eating the sugar cubes to prove it.

After the race, Andrew approached me; he touched my snout gently, petting my mane. I nestled into him. I knew he was proud of me, because I was proud of myself.

It may embarrass him for me to share it, but Andrew and I made love through my horse suit that night—a final consummation on my internal transformation and achievement. The next morning at the breakfast table, I heard the girls asking our chef, "I heard neighing last night—was there a horse in the house?" Andrew and I couldn't stop laughing. Our life, finally, was complete.

**T**HE VERY ESSENCE of being alive is one of change. We are forced to adapt, and it only behooves us to find a path of adaptation that brings us joy.

I think of my father, who followed his whims responsibly and lived a long, fruitful life on three continents. I think of my loving husband, who chooses to never question, but always declines to answer. I think of George Bush. I think of my daughters, who are being brought up by a mother who believes in finding personal power and holding on tight. Mattalia will compete in the Olympics for the second time next year, and Genna is already the "quirky" one. She dreams of Yale Law School.

In years since my first race, I've competed close to eighty times in both private and public contexts. My body has stayed taut and athletic, and my mind has sharpened. For entire days at a time, I'll find myself in a horse mindset—practically unable to communicate with speech. Even now as I type, my fingers feel stiff, aching to be hooved. In this way, I'm free.

Will time travel exist in my lifetime? Perhaps. I think often of the moment to which I return. Would I speak to my ex-boyfriend's mother who introduced me to derbies? The meek lab proctor who, by failing, showed me what success meant to me? My dad? No. I think I would visit my younger self.

If I could go back in time to visit myself as a child in Arizona, what would I say? Would I let that small girl know what's in store? Or would I walk right past her, hop over the back fence, and walk onto the ranch to be with my greatest equine inspirations? Yes.

I think they would recognize me as one of their own. I think we would gallop. ♦



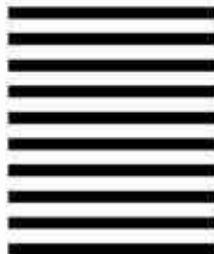
*"The new issue has a brilliant article analyzing the situation in Syria or something."*



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## KNOTTY BY NATURE

*Searching for the world's preeminent knot expert*

BY JORDAN HALL



**T**HIS PAST SEPTEMBER, I sat in a cozy, dimly lit pub, overlooking the River Ness, in what is generally regarded as the capital city of the Scottish Highlands, Inverness. Across the bank, and a few hundred yards upriver, stood Inverness Castle, a red sandstone structure built into the cliff, whose foundations date back to the eleventh century. The pub was mostly empty, save for a small group of tourists preparing to visit the famed loch, twenty-three miles

to the southwest, of which the eponymous river stems. I initially balked at ordering a drink—it was 10:00 A.M. on a Tuesday—but my day guide was late, and the tourist group was already at it. I ordered a stout brown ale.

Ten minutes later, Dunklin Donegan slid into my booth. Donegan is pale white with fine obsidian hair. At about six feet four, he is tall for a Scot and conspicuously thin. As he slouched into the corner, limbs spread akimbo,

he reminded me of the fragile final set-piece in a game of pickup sticks. Still, he is an indefatigable character. He has faint scarring along his forearms and hands from a teenage firebreathing accident. (The flame never made it to his mouth.) He also has a habit of talking to himself, and, when he makes a mistake, aping his mother's old censure: "Oh, Dunklin, you've done it again." He took two shots of an unidentifiable spirit, and we were off.

Our destination was about forty miles northwest of the city, to the remote mountainous region near Ben Wyvis—from the Gaelic, "Hill of Terror." Once there, Donegan and I would begin our search for the man I came here for. We would have to track him down by our own means: no one knew for certain where he lived, or, frankly, if he was even alive. He was once the most famous knot expert, or knotsman, in the world. In the 1980s, he was perennially considered a popular candidate for knighthood, and, over a career spanning several decades, his admirers have included the likes of David Cameron, Michel Houellebecq, and Dame Helen Mirren. But Larry Schnotz hadn't been seen in twenty-five years. The reason for his disappearance was unknown, but recently rumors had begun to surface. Some said that Schnotz was working again. In fact, they said, he'd been working throughout his supposed hiatus. For the last twenty-five years, Schnotz had been developing the Holy Grail of knots—a knot that would subsume all others. Now, it was tied.

**O**F COURSE, A mischievous enthusiasm for local myth-making is de rigeur in this farflung part of the world. For a region of its diminutive size and political influence, the Highlands have a disproportionately strong hold on our imagination. This

*From 1990 to 2011, Larry Schnotz didn't tie a single knot.*

is the home of William Wallace, Nessy, and Arthur, depending on your source. James Bond, like his first off-screen correlative, is Scottish. The grounds of Inverness Castle are supposed to have been the residence of the historical King Macbeth. Five-hundred years later, the exiled Mary Stuart sieged the castle gates and decapitated the garrison's governor, whom she described as "headless in life and death" and "a ninny." Scotland has never been short on stories.

Fittingly, Dunklin Donegan has never tired of hearing them. If some locals were skeptical of Schnotz's hoary mythos, Donegan remained a zealot, despite having never seen him. "Sometimes I feel like Paul," he told me, referring to the first-century proselytizer who persecuted Christians before becoming an apostle. "I may be late to the party, but I'm ready to get drunk." Donegan and I had originally met through an online forum for the Mongolian trance-jazz fusion trio, Next Steppes. He regularly posted, and we quickly struck up a rapport. I first visited him last spring. Not long into the trip, I discovered his fascination with the obscure, mostly forgotten art of knotting. He had discovered knots as an adolescent, working the docks at the Port of Inverness to help out with family finances. His father was a failed truancy officer, and his mother raised Dunklin and four other siblings mostly on her own. When he was thirteen, his father left on a barge bound for New York, where he would find another job as a truancy officer, only to lose it again weeks later. "He was lazy and forgetful," Donegan told me. It was around this time that he took up firebreathing.

Still, knots captivated him more than anything. At the port, two older deckhands, Fergus and Drewed, would teach the young Donegan three to four new knots each time they came to harbor, en route from Edinburgh or the Shetland Islands to the north. "We'd pull into town, and there would be Dunklin, shouting at us from the quay," said Fergus. "Oh please, sirs, teach me more about knots," he'd say. "I need to know more about knots, or I'll never amount to anything."

Fergus and Drewed eventually



DR JEKYLL AND MR ANONYMOUS COMMENTER

taught Donegan about Schnotz, whom they had known, and who had gone into hiding about eight years prior. "Larry was a real prodigy," Drewed told me. He said that Schnotz "was like da Vinci, excepting that he really had no talents other than tying knots. But, say if da Vinci only had one talent—like if da Vinci was the F. Scott Fitzgerald of his day—that's what Larry was: the F.



Scott Fitzgerald of knots. And me and Fergie thought Donegan was the same way, excepting that he was definitely way worse than Larry at tying knots."

The more he learned, the more Donegan became obsessed. He read every piece of literature on Schnotz he could find and methodically worked his way through Schnotz's own voluminous bibliography. First, the basics: "Knots for Knots' Sake," "Knots of ol' Knapoli," and "Larry's Last Knot... Not!" These books are essentially

primers on the history and craft of knotsmanship, published in the mid- to late-seventies, and include tutorials on some of Schnotz's favorite standards. From there, Schnotz's oeuvre becomes characteristically esoteric. There's "Knotstrodamus," published in 1981, followed three years later by "Knotsticism: Do Knots Exist?" and, in 1985, "Knothilism: Knots Don't Exist." These works are all but inaccessible to even the most experienced knotsmen, much less a novice, but they assume a Biblical significance for Donegan. I thumbed through some of his well-worn copies and hardly knew where to begin. There were rough etchings, occult symbols, whole passages of the Greek poetess Sappho, untranslated and previously thought to be lost. One of Schnotz's more curious works, "Knot Knot Jokes: Not Bad Jokes," consisted of five pages of pop-up figures, none of which were knots (and, incidentally, none of which were recognizable as anything at all). Some have accused Schnotz of obfuscation. Ten years ago, in the midst of one of Schnotz's decadal renaissances, the critic N. Q. Voldenheim announced that the contents of six whole books could be arranged into a single uninterrupted acrostic. If true, the discovery was a miracle. But the acrostic followed a complex code of lateral moves unique to each page, and Voldenheim died shortly after his discovery, before he could publish his findings. A cryptog-

rapher has recently built a computer to sort through the code, but it will be at least another decade until the acrostic can be reassembled.

As Donegan drove us up Highway A835 toward Ben Wyvis, I asked him why he was so fervently drawn to Schnotz. He paused and took a breath. “A lot of people I know tell me, ‘Well, it’s just a knot, isn’t it? Who cares?’” He gazed out on the empty highway. Storm clouds had gathered in the distance. “Schnotz’s best knots are easy and hard, simple and complex, because he knows—life itself is a knot.”

THE HISTORY OF knots is the history of time. Paleolithic gorillas tied knots out of tree branches and leaves to build beds. In 1923, a fishing net was discovered in a Finnish peat bog that dated back to 7200 B.C.E. Greek seafarers made good use of knots, as did their trade partners (and occasional enemies) to the east in Anatolia and along the Phoenician coastline. The Romans added their own innovations, some of which, like Caligula’s, tended toward the prurient. But the knot is perhaps most closely tied to our myths and iconographies: the endless knot of Tibetan Buddhism, the Hindu Pasha, Alexander’s severed Gordian knot, the lasso of John Wayne, the lasso of George Bailey. The word ‘knot’ appears 468 times in Shakespeare—a number scholars note is significant not only for its frequency, but because each digit represents a unique rope loop.

Unsurprisingly, knotsmen are notoriously fastidious and use a hyper-specific lexicon: for instance, a rope is not simply a rope. It has discrete parts. The bight is a doubled section of the rope that doesn’t cross itself; a bight that crosses itself is a loop. The run-



### THREE POEMS BY TIM PLATT

#### Poem 1:

i.

The chameleon’s tongue is its most boring flesh  
its springing shocks the weak-willed cadavers too  
thoraxed to fly

ii.

the chameleon’s eyes dart as independently  
as two brothers in the back seat of a moving car  
straining their belts as they claw for different bags of sugar  
on the packed ground

iii.

the skin of each chameleon is the same in its variety  
another boring cycle of change in a tree too used to color

iv.

the chameleon is my favorite dang animal (lizard)

#### Poem 2:

a glue spotted spaniel  
a dog covered in glue  
a pooch patched with glue  
there’s so much glue on that dog  
that dog is covered in glue

ning end of the rope is the end you’re not tying; the working end of the rope is the end you are. There are two central categories of knots: a hitch ties the rope to an object (or itself), whereas a bend joins two ropes or webbing ends together—the taxonomy is extensive.

No one knows for certain how many knots are in active use today, or how many have been used throughout history. Unlike bones, stonework, or the kinds of relics and ephemera found in an Indiana Jones film, rope yarn decays over time, making it a pain for archaeologists. Knots probably reached their apex in the 18th and early 19th centuries, between the Age of Discovery and the dawn of steam-powered vessels, when every Protestant European fam-

ily was expected to own, at minimum, three books: the Bible, Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress,” and Clifford Ashley’s “Groundwork and Enquiry into Knots and Their Origins.” The English knot historian Ethane McCauley told me that “at the height of the British Royal Navy, during the Napoleonic Wars, bored sailors that had endured months without seeing military action might know thousands of knots by heart.” Today, even among the knot cognoscenti (of which McCauley is quick to self-identify), that number has dwindled to perhaps three to four hundred. The most popular have stood the test of time: the figure eight, the anchor hitch, and the double-slipped reef knot, also known as the shoelace knot. And while

Poem 3:

Though derelict and dismal  
Craig's body grew and grew and grew.  
bemused portentions magnify  
a giant's jar of pickled brew-  
infused with puss with piss and stink  
and stuffed with stuff that giant's drink-  
Craig froze affix'd upon the jar  
for there was enough for two.

camera eyes confound aflash  
betroth'd despite a poor review  
Craig's hands-beringed-grasp, lift to sip  
the giant's jar of pickled brew.  
"Forsake the flare, despise the shine-  
respite from crimson fists and wine"  
read ribbons banner'd round the hall  
outline'd by glitter and glue.

Braggin Bozos barely born  
formed then reformed a merry crew.  
Adorned their king's thorn crown with drink-  
the giant's jar of pickled brew.  
As liquids pour from cup to crown  
the Bozos' eyes glue on the frown  
of Bozo King, King Bozo born  
by the daughters of the coup.

—*Tim Platt*

there is an art to the craft, there is, nevertheless, a correct method; or, as Ashley writes: "A knot is never nearly right; it is either exactly right or hopelessly wrong; there is nothing in between."

The knot that brought me back to Scotland—the one that Schnotz was rumored to have finished—is one that knotsmen have been contemplating, theorizing on, and failing to tie for as long as anyone can remember. Like a sugary carbonated beverage, or God himself, it goes by many names, but in the Highlands, at least, it is called the Knot of Life. Fergus told me that the Knot of Life "is basically the knot to end all knots; a catch-all, a knot Messiah." In other words, it's a knot that is so infinitely utilitarian it obviates all oth-

ers and, as so, boasts an almost divine character. Ashley mentions something similar to it, as have other commentators. McCauley, who is a professor emeritus at Our Lady of Righteous Plagues, claims to have traced its origin as far back as the ancient Minoan civilization at Crete. In particular, he points to the famous Cretan labyrinth, which, as the story goes, the Greek hero Theseus successfully navigated en route to slaying the Minotaur. "The labyrinth was omnipresent for the Minoans," he told me over the phone. "It was a seminal mythological image, a symbol of life." This much scholars tend to agree on, but McCauley, as he is wont to do, went further. He found it "easy to see how the image of the laby-

rinth may metamorphose into the image of the knot," which is "itself a microcosmic simulacrum" and "a thing of fearful symmetry and terrible beauty." He continued that it was "not incidental" that, according to the myth, "the maiden Ariadne had supplied Theseus with a ball of yarn, i.e., a *rope*"—he emphasized this last point—"with which to retrace his steps out of the maze. So we have the symbol within the symbol; we have a Russian doll set."

While all this may fall somewhere between benign lunacy and perfidious imbecility, nearly everyone I spoke to on the subject echoed McCauley's enthusiasm. "Larry rapped on and on about the Knot of Life," said Fergus. "He'd go weeks without sleeping, just thinking about it—wouldn't put hand to rope," Drewed concurred. They said that in the mid-eighties, to usher in some kind of revelation, Schnotz moved to the countryside just beyond Inverness proper. He fashioned himself in the mold of a modern-day prophet, and his behavior became increasingly strange. He dieted on wild oats and locusts. With a nod to Descartes (knowingly or otherwise), he once walked into the town's laundromat, curled up inside a running dryer, and meditated for a week and a half. When that failed, he thought a new hobby might spark his creativity. He discovered a documentary on bagpipes—he had never heard of them—and tried to teach himself how to play. Even accounting for the instrument's infamous difficulty, Drewed told me that Schnotz was remarkably bad. His nearest neighbors from several miles away petitioned and won a municipal injunction that forced him to quit. Still, Schnotz sought inspiration. He tried falconry and lost four falcons in three hours, all of which returned a few days later to attack him in unison. The following week he was diagnosed with a rare strain of avian influenza, or bird flu. The doctors indicated it was contracted from a separate incident.

Nonetheless, although he'd grown erratic, Schnotz's disappearance a few years later remained a mystery. Throughout this period, he had continued to go into town to socialize, on occasion. Friends said he seemed to be straightening out. In 1989, he wrote

one of the most commercially successful books of his career, “Red Rover, Red Rover, Bring Larry Schnotz Over: To Teach Us About More Knots.”

“One day he was just gone,” said Drewed. “Haven’t seen him since.”

I COULD TELL Donegan was nervous as we began to approach Ben Wyvis. More than anyone I’d met, he had placed all his faith in the Knot of Life, and, in particular, Schnotz’s Ahabian quest for it. As he told me, “it was not incidental” that he’d taken up knotting soon after he left the Scottish Presbyterian Church of his childhood, and it was clear that, for Donegan, the Knot had replaced the Cross. (In conversation, he regularly referred to himself as a “guerilla atheist.”) Fergus and Drewed were forthright in expressing their concern over Donegan’s fanaticism, but they acknowledged that there was little they could do. “There’s been a great gape in Dunklin’s soul since he was a lad,” said Fergus. “Something that’s been missing, something, like, numinous and elemental that’s not there, and that he’s been fighting to fill in with something else his whole life—hence, the fire business.”

As he drove, Donegan tapped his scarred fingers against the steering wheel. Soon, the southern hills of Ben Wyvis were on our right, and, in the distance, a steep, barren ridge shot up into the gray sky. According to his source, Schnotz was rumored to live in a shack built somewhere into the side of the mountain’s southern face, which was inaccessible to vehicles. We drove another three miles, parked by the roadside, and began to walk.

For two and a half hours, we saw no lifeforms, human or otherwise, when suddenly some black mass of a bird streaked overhead, startling us and causing Donegan to cough up a large, half-masticated block of cheese that he’d exhumed from his pack pocket. Soon, we reached a depression in the mountain, which opened to a small brook and waterfall, twenty feet wide at the base. Donegan paused and peered up to find the fall’s source, but a thick fog had rolled in and obscured our view. We leapt through. On the other side of the fall, directly in front of us, was a stairwell carved out from the bowels of



*“After we hook up I’ll want to blog a little.”*

the mountain. Donegan took off, and I hurried after him in the darkness, feeling the way with my hands.

When the stair ended, I stood beside Donegan on a ledge, three-quarters of the way up the mountain. A stream sprang from a crevice in the rock to our right. To our left, the wall sucked in and the shoulder widened. A wattle and daub hut was in the corner. Larry Schnotz stood before us holding a dead raven and an iron-pronged shillelagh. He looked as if he’d been waiting.

SCHNOTZ IS SHAPED in the fashion of your father’s bedside lamp: round, splayed feet form a firm foundation, which sharply narrows in the legs, bulges in the waist, thins in the chest and neck, and is finally engulfed by a conic shag of extra-white hair that extends well past his shoulders. Despite his fubsiness, Schnotz’s jeans were still a size and a half too big, and he’d tied a double-slip through his belt loops to hold them up, resulting in an accordion of pant creases. The rest of his wardrobe

consisted of a red turtleneck, a khaki vest with a sheriff’s badge pinned to it, a turquoise bolo tie, a madras driver’s cap, and a sleeveless white duster. His general demeanor was that of an effete wizard.

“I spied you coming along the dale—you and the bird.” He held up the mutilated raven like a Thanksgiving turkey. I asked him how he’d procured it, partly to ease into the conversation, partly out of a genuine curiosity. He pointed to an indentation in the rock face above us, which he’d camouflaged in heather and moss detritus. “I prank the bozos,” he said. He shuffled to the cliff’s edge to demonstrate his trickery, shadowboxing at the sky, a la Charlie Chaplin. “They think they’ve found a nest or snooze station, and they whizz into my trap and bam”—he struck the club against the rock—“I smack them flat on the wall.” He smiled and pointed beneath the faux nest, where the ground was caked in feathers.

Inside, Schnotz’s hut was larger than I expected. Lanterns hung from log rafters, and a cataract of knots covered the walls, each one tagged with a

small paper label. I checked over two hundred of these against my research to ensure I hadn't previously come across any of them. I hadn't. Their names were typically Schnotzian: Paolo and Francesca in Hell; Pinkie's Promise; the Savage Phoenician; the Jack and Rose Slip; Chastity's Buckle; Hamlet's Solution; Harry, Meet Sally. I asked Schnotz how many there were; he had no idea.

As Donegan and I joined him by the fire, he poured us two bright red drinks. "Hi-C," he said. "I make it from the concentrate." He raised his cup in a toast, and we drank. Having broached the reason for our visit, I asked him a few questions, but Schnotz was reluctant to discuss himself or his career. "What's you folks' obsession with me, anyway? You got a crush?" He giggled to himself. "I try not to get so *knotted* up in the details of life nowadays." He nodded toward the wall to tip off his joke. "What's you folks' most favorite music group?" he asked. "You like music?" (Schnotz is interminably curious, and, when he asks a question, he tilts his head to the right and sticks his tongue between his teeth, like a Bichon Frise.) "I like show tunes and Smashing Pumpkins," he said. "Billy Corgan came out of the cradle *endlessly rocking!*"

He reached under the kitchen table for a small stereobox, inserted a CD, and pressed play: "The world is a vampire!" Schnotz sang along word-for-word to "Bullet with Butterfly Wings," raising his arms above his head and pumping his fists toward the ceiling. At the turn of the chorus, he climbed on top of the table, bouncing up and down like an analog alarm clock. Donegan turned toward me; he looked baffled. By the time "1979" began, Schnotz had been singing Smashing Pumpkins for over an hour. He stepped down from the table, took a long draught of Hi-C, and started to talk.

**S**CHNOTZ WAS BORN in 1940 in Inverness to his parents, Tim and Elise Schnotz, née Nin. "My father was a shoe salesman," he told me. I asked if that was how he stumbled upon his love of knots. He looked perplexed. "Oh, no," he replied. "He sold clogs. I never really worn laced shoes before; never liked the look of them." He pointed to the ground: he was wearing

triple-velcro, eggshell white sneakers.

His father's clog shop was a financial disaster for a panoply of reasons, but primarily because no one in Scotland wore clogs. When Schnotz turned twelve, his father rebranded and changed the store's name from The Schnotz Shop to Clogs for Bogs. It was a bold idea—clogs to wear in bogs—but business stayed dismal, and his already slim customer base soon discovered clogs to be poor footwear in marshy terrain. Most of the family's income was dependent upon Schnotz's mother, Elise, who was a half-sister to the famed bohemian and erotica writer Anaïs Nin. Anaïs pitied Elise's provincial living situation and subsidized the Schnotz's modest, working-class lifestyle. Schnotz recalled his aunt visiting the family as a child and bringing along Henry Miller, her lover at the time. Miller seemed to leave a poor impression. "Father called him 'priapic,'" he said, leaning forward in his chair, as he often does to solicit an explanation.

Growing up in Cold War Scotland was tough on the young Larry. Tim Schnotz was a member of the underground Revolutionary Highlanders Workers Party, who, together with the Lowlander chapter, were commonly known as Sea Levelers. As a child, Schnotz was confused about Scotland's turbulent political state (wholly elided in standard American history textbooks). "My father came home from meetings all wound up, saying wild things like—'Larry, the proletariat's day is nigh! Take up the sickle! Put on your clogs!' My mother sat in the corner and smoked cigarettes. She didn't heed him much."

Schnotz never felt comfortable discussing politics and tried his best to avoid it. After school, rather than going home, he began to hang around the Inverness pubs, where old men would trade stories and impart wisdom. At one point, the subject of knots came up. "I don't remember how," Schnotz told me. "It was just a thing old folks talked about." He started to try out some standard ties and quickly gained a knack for it. Older patrons, discerning a raw talent, encouraged him to continue developing his skills. Soon, Schnotz was inventing his own knots. He started an after-school club in which he lectured

classmates on theory and practice. Not long after, some of the pub crowd started to show up. He published his first book in 1967.

When I asked him about the Knot of Life, he recoiled, nearly falling into the flame. (He reacted this way every time I said its name, periodically spewing his Hi-C; the fourth time I mentioned it, he shrieked.) After composing himself, Schnotz said that he'd "first heard of it through the older knotsmen, who'd heard of it from their elders, and them from theirs, you know." In a striking admission, he told me that the entire ordeal had been a mistake, and that it had, in fact, motivated his voluntary exile. "I was being a little boy back then, really getting into myself, really—" He turned flush and made a series of obscene hand gestures. He said that he eventually "got embarrassed. It was embarrassing to be believing in that hocus pocus. It don't exist." (At this, Donegan shuddered, and the reflection of the fire flared in his eyes.) When I asked Schnotz how he could know for certain that the Knot of Life was merely a myth, he shrugged his shoulders. "Of everyone, I suppose I should know," he replied.

Schnotz told me that from 1990, when he first fled to Ben Wyvis, to 2011, he didn't tie a single knot. "I said to myself, Hey, what have you done with your life? Hey, I'm talking to you! You've wasted it, sitting around, tying knots." He said that he'd "grown sick of it." He meant literally. At the sight of a knot, he would "go queasy and just start barfing stuff up. I'd wake in the morning, see an old knot of mine, barf. Go outside, see a bag of knots, barf. And when I tried closing my eyes, I could smell them, or I'd run into them trying to feel my way around, and barf some more. For years I lived like that, barfing on knots."

One day, around the summer of 1999, Schnotz had a revelation. "Well, I realized I could untie them," he said. The aftereffect of this notion was seismic. He became obsessed with untying knots. "Take how much I loved tying knots and make it bigger, like a bigger amount"—he spread his arms out wide, signaling for me to imitate him so that I could grasp his analogy. "That's how much I liked untying knots," he told



*"Is the snark fresh today?"*

me. "Much more!" He worked his way through his own collection—what he figured to be in the five figures—in three days. The process was expurgative, "like working off a sin." He visited a tarn a few miles away that fishermen frequented and began offering to untangle knots in their lines for a pecuniary fee. It wasn't long until he had his own business. Unaware of his identity, the fishermen assumed Schnotz was simply a hermit and respected his privacy. Nonetheless, in-the-know locals soon started to visit, asking Schnotz to untie other miscellanea, like cornrows or dissolved friendships' friendship bracelets. For twenty-one years, Schnotz never took a day off. "After a while, I stopped barfing," he told me.

But, in 2011, something strange happened. "I was sitting by the water one Sunday morning, like I always did, and my friend Lou's fishing line had gotten tangled up fearsomely bad. He brought it over for inspection, and it was a hot mess. Just spiteful. Like when a dog gets real mean."

He paused for effect. "You know when dogs get real mean?"

I nodded.

"So, it was like that," he said.

"Most of the time it won't take me but two or three minutes to untie a knot, even a bad one. But after ten minutes I still hadn't finished. I said, Hey, weird! It took me nine hours to finish; Lou must've caught a dozen fish on his other line at that point. But, by the time I was done, I realized that was a beautiful knot, beautiful in its fearsomeness. I handed the line back to Lou and haven't seen him or the lake since."

"So you went back to tying knots?" asked Donegan.

"Oh yes," said Schnotz. "All these in four years," he said, pointing to the walls. He looked at Donegan. "You don't know how to tie a knot until you've learned to untie one."

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, Donegan had the haggard look of someone who had suffered rough dreams and little sleep. His eyes drooped, and, as he tended to the fire, flames played on his shirtless, pellucid torso, illuminating his entrails so that he resembled a gas station summer roll. While Schnotz and I had stayed up late talking, Donegan had opted to sleep outside, clearly shaken by Schnotz's knot-of-life postmortem. "Just de-

flated, that's all," Donegan assured me, on the drive back to Inverness.

When I told Fergus and Drewed about Schnotz's apostasy a few days later, they were simultaneously non-plussed and suspicious. "Larry's always up to something," said Fergus. "You really think he's been hiding up there for twenty-five years with nothing but a few thousand more knots to show for it? He can tie a thousand knots in a week if he wanted." Ethan McCauley was more pointed. In a series of e-mails, he called Schnotz a "blasphemous, ossified crone" and a "pussywillow'd iteration of Kurtz, ripe for this age of dilettantes, who daren't glance at the heart of darkness for fear of what he'd find." He then compared him to a Holocaust denier.

The following week, I met Donegan at the same pub along the River Ness; his favorite in town, he told me. It was a pleasant autumn day—perhaps the last of its kind that year—so we sat outside on the deck. Donegan looked more tired than fraught, and confessed that he'd been in a kind of hypnagogic daze since Ben Wyvis. He couldn't remember if he'd slept. I noticed what appeared to be fresh scars on his knuckles, but let it pass. When I asked him how he was doing, he said that it was "nothing new," and that he'd "been let down before. It was always just a hope. I'm lucky to meet him at all." I explained how I had tried to tease out more from Schnotz about the Knot of Life after Donegan had left the hut, but that I'd mostly come up empty-handed. When I mentioned McCauley's labyrinth theory to him, Schnotz mistook "Minoa" for "Samoa," the popular Girl Scouts cookies, which led to a long digression on the G.S.A. and whether I'd brought any. After that, I didn't mention it again.

Still, I encouraged Donegan: before we'd left the ledge, Schnotz had made Donegan promise he'd visit soon; it was lonely on the mountain, and he could use a knotting partner. "Maybe a Pyrrhic victory, after all," Donegan joked. He gave a small grin and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head and looking at the high, red walls of Macbeth's castle in the distance. "There's a Scottish proverb," he

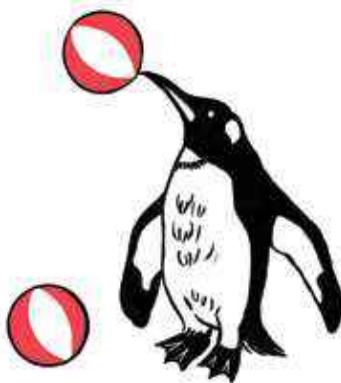
said. “And who should tie the Knot of Life has surely hacked the heavn’s.” I waited for him to continue, but he was silent for the remainder of the afternoon. It was a sunny, cloudless day, and we watched tourists fish on the banks of the river. If they spoke, they spoke of monsters.

THREE MONTHS LATER Schnotz was in New York for the third annual Brooklyn Knot Festival. He brought Donegan along with him, whom he had agreed to take on as an apprentice—or as Schnotz quipped, “a knotspert.” The first day I saw them, Schnotz was in a notably giddy mood; Donegan, too, seemed to have recovered. They had just finished lunch at the Flatiron Olive Garden, where Schnotz claimed to have eaten five baskets of garlic knots. We met at Madison Square Park and walked. Schnotz had never been to the city. “Haven’t left my ledge in ten years,” he told me. “Dunklin’s got me back on the social circuit.” Contrary to his usual staggered and waddling gait, Schnotz scooted around the city blocks like a Super Nintendo-era Mario. He wore the exact same clothing as the last time we’d met, only he’d added a pair of overlarge transition-lense glasses that he had bought at the 30 Rock Concourse earlier in the day. “I spotted a big rat!” he said. I told him it wasn’t uncommon. “Oh, it was a Nessy. You should’ve seen it running around.” He pulled out a pulverized, seven-and-a-half-inch rat from his Strand tote bag. “I swatted the bozo with my club before they took it from me.” Donegan explained their conversation with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

When Donegan had first e-mailed me to confirm they would be coming to the convention, I held out hope that Schnotz would put a new work on display. He disabused the notion. “No, those days are done; better to see what these tykes is up to and not cause a stir.” I hailed a cab near Union Square, and we headed to a bar on the West Side Highway at 11th Street. Schnotz wanted to see the Hudson.

The bar was mostly empty, so Schnotz headed to the jukebox. “I still love anything off ‘Siamese Twins,’” he

said, referring to the Smashing Pumpkins’ 1993 release, right before the group catapulted into alt-rock stardom. Having put in his credit, he sat down at our table. On occasion, when a song reached a particularly catchy crescendo or climax, he would pump his arms in the air and holler out to the empty bar. When I asked him a question I’d meant to breach last time—namely, how could someone who traced their Scottish ancestry back six generations have the surname of Schnotz—he looked bewildered. It was evident that he’d never considered the discrepancy. I asked him if he worried about being recognized at the convention after a quarter-century away from the public eye. “Certainly not,” he told me. “I don’t hold up the same as I did then.” I couldn’t argue: what little pictures of Schnotz that



existed didn’t look anything like him now, and, in the past twenty-five years, Schnotz had assumed the look of a man whose old age was sempiternal, even cosmic, and who was in fact unimaginable at a younger age, like Santa Claus or Werner Herzog. “Plus,” he said, “who cares? It’s like when you play hide-and-seek and the hider is so hidden, the seeker gives up ‘cus they stop caring.”

Two days later, I was in Greenpoint at the Brooklyn Expo Center. Donegan had texted me in the morning to meet them outside, but the crowd was enormous. Apparently Brooklyn had caught the bug, and I regretted not buying a ticket in advance. I called Donegan but got a voicemail; I tried again—no response. Given the high concentration of phone signals, I assumed the local cell tower was overloaded. After more than thirty minutes in line, I bought

my ticket and walked inside.

The floor was buzzing. Hipsters cavorted from display to display. One group I passed was discussing the merits of the Albright special, a knot used in angling to tie two different diameters of line together. Another debated the aesthetics of the Twined Turk’s head, a closed-loop decorative knot commonly found lining ship decks. But Brooklyn hipsters weren’t the only patrons: a sea of bodies sprawled across the chic concrete floor. It seemed as if all of New York had been converted.

Promenading among the tables, I noticed a crowd gathering in the northeast corner of the room. Someone shouted. Suddenly, an EMT crew rushed past me, towing a twenty-something male in a gurney. He was nearly catatonic, except for his lips, which appeared to mouth a prayer. Someone pulled the fire alarm, and sprinklers flooded from the ceiling. I ran toward the commotion, pushing through a growing crowd of spectators. Some spoke in tongues, some wept. I saw a well-known Wall Street executive rend his suit in half, and a group of improv comedians were moved to silence. When I’d finally navigated to the front, Donegan stood with his right hand on the shoulder of Schnotz, who sat cross-legged in a folding chair. In his lap, he cradled a mahogany chest, from which emitted a fabulous light. Men and women laid prostrate in a crescent on the floor before him, proffering whatever they could find in their pockets at Schnotz’s feet—spare cash, pictures of their infant children. An elderly woman went into labor on the floor.

A small knot laid on the chest’s red velvet cushion. At first glance, it was a simple knot—a few maneuvers, a clever tie, but nothing a modestly experienced knotsman couldn’t conjure. But the closer I looked, the more the knot’s complexity was revealed to me. I remembered what Donegan had told me. It was a simple knot and through its simplicity, complex. The virtues were ineffably entwined. I smiled at Schnotz, and he winked at me through his glasses, which, from the strobing fire alarm lights, were slowly transitioning over his irises like the fall of a curtain. ♦

## VOWEL OF SILENCE

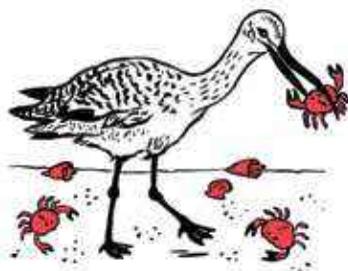
*A choral composer who hates the human voice*

BY MICHAEL YARSKY

IT WAS 1996 when the Pittsburgh Steelers lost to the Dallas Cowboys on Super Bowl XXX, but it was not the defeat that left a long-lasting impression on composer Oliver Robeson; in fact, it was the national anthem; not how it was sung necessarily, but perhaps that it was sung at all. “No travesty had stricken such a traumatic blow to my musical imagination than the egomaniacal disposition with which the average—and I mean *average*—singer exploits this categorically abysmal National Anthem,” he wrote in his private diaries. “It made me realize how much joy a vocalist would hold hostage in order to bolster their egos. There is no need for prolonging the singer’s moment in that context. Then again, there’s no context for which prolonging a singer’s moment is allowable, let alone even giving those monsters any moment to ruin.” To this day he claims that his favorite national anthem is the Roman national anthem, as he has yet to hear it.

Robeson does not much remember being exposed to the joys of singing in his childhood; as a white male his church’s attempts to invigorate the ceremony often felt stilted and awkward. The sound, as he recalls it, carried an unpleasant yet validating ghostliness to it: “I liked how ashamed they were to sing, those people,” he said. “They ought to feel that way given what an absurd gesture it truly is. And shame is the church’s bread and butter. I can tolerate the shameful act of singing so long as the performer feels the shame with me. I’m so tired of how oblivious they are to themselves.” His parents were avid listeners of classic rock and soul, never singing along to

the radio for fear of ruining the listening experience for other family members; he had learned from that experience that his parents were generous enough to “let the awfulness of a singer speak for itself.” Once when his cousin came to visit she began to sing along to Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons. Twenty minutes later, a doctor had to surgically remove a mechanical pencil from Robeson’s ear. “I clicked the eraser bit repeatedly hoping the lead would enter my brain and poison me. But I wasn’t so lucky.” In an unfortunate foreshadowing of his old-age impotence, there was no lead in his pencil.



As a child, Robeson’s sanctuary became the library due to its strict adherence to the values of silence. Even whispers seemed like tiny revolts against propriety during long sessions studying the point of singing. He detested hummers, literally. By chance he pulled a score of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, scribbled a note in it, and presented it to a customer at the library who was humming. It stated, “Why don’t you keep your masturbating to yourself and wank it in the restroom?” To this day it remains not only a cogent request, but an accurate critique of Mahler’s Eighth.

Robeson’s aversion to the human voice became quite trouble-

some only when he began attending elementary school. His parents, of Irish Catholic descent, had very little experience with the pleasures of verbal communication, or the pleasures of anything for that matter, and maintained that value system until their appropriately stoic and anguished deaths. On her last day alive, Robeson’s mother drove to the beach in a bathrobe with all of its pockets filled with stones, and stared into the distance. Police found her dead that evening.

Robeson remembers reacting very quietly. The day before his 44th birthday, the investigation confirmed the worst: she threw the stones across the surface of the water, used the bathrobe as a towel to sunbathe nude, and then accidentally shot herself with a pistol.

“I knew she always respected my wishes until the very end,” Robeson said of her many years later. “The pistol had a silencer.”

He was an only child in a neighborhood with no other children his age with which to play. He remembers his first transgression as a student when a classmate tried to teach his peers how to whistle. In an attempt to eliminate the piercing sound from the air, he grabbed an eraser from the chalkboard and tried to erase the boy’s lips. “WHY MUST YOU MAKE IT ALL ABOUT YOU?” he hissed at his classmate before being sent to the principal’s office. His parents were quite in character in their punishment: “They simply told me to never, ever do it again. It was stern, but mercifully short,” he wrote. “Their words stung, if only because they were spoken out loud.”

Robeson did, however, have plenty of role models in his upbringing. He admired the silent



ILLUSTRATION BY REID FAYLOR

*Robeson, like John Cage, experimented with sensory deprivation.*

films of Buster Keaton and Vincent Price. His grandfather owned an art-house theater in East Brad-dock, PA, which has since closed, and would often invite his grand-son along to watch the movies that he himself treasured as a child. “I saw *Metropolis* when I was about seven or eight,” he recalls in his memoirs. “Well, it turns out I only saw two-thirds of it or something like that. People find my preference for it over the ‘I Have A Dream’ speech incredibly galling. I don’t get it.” School was miserable for him with the exception of one stu-dent assembly where a professional mime performed for the children. “I was enraptured,” he commented. “I have blocked out of my memory the primitive shrieks of laughter.” He implored his parents to pay for pantomime lessons; he was ea-ger to be instructed in the ways of conveying information without the use of voice. His parents capitulat-ed, and the mime, known as Jahinie Watts, took his very first student at his magic shop in Homestead. The lesson lasted five seconds. Robeson remembers walking through the door when Jahinie greeted him:

“Hi, are you here for lessons?” he asked. It broke me. It broke me forever.”

Robeson refers to it as his per-sonal Santa Claus moment: the re-alization that a mime speaks when not on stage. (Actually, he took comfort in Santa Claus’s non-ex-istence because of how he detested caroling.) Because mimes didn’t truly commit to silence, Robeson strived to incorporate more silence into his daily routine. In high school he recalls founding a Gen-der Issues organization to promote not only LGBTQ issues, but also to implement the national LGBTQ youth-run effort called the “Day of Silence.” As the only head of any student organization that was not a senior, he was not re-designated as head for his senior year because of his over-prioritization of the “Day of Silence” in meetings. He called for year-long “Meetings of Silence.” He was not receptive to

discussing any LGBTQ issues, or discussion in general.

**B**ESIDES SPENDING AN inordinate amount of time at a library and reading about Buddhist monasteries, his first breakthrough came from a joke made at his ex-pense. His uncle and aunt, both modest donors to the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, attended the orchestra’s first performance of John Cage’s tacit, three-part piano piece *4’33”*. “It would be perfect for your quiet son,” they quipped. He spent the following Friday listen-ing to it repeatedly on a vinyl in the Homestead public library, and even relishing the score. He describes it as a revolutionary moment for him, and wanted desperately to surmise whether or not such a piece would work for a choir. (Robeson once told me if he were ever made Pres-ident, he would declare *4’33”* our national anthem. He would also enact more moments of silence for fallen warriors, perhaps one every quarter of an hour.)

Without knowing any music theory or the structure of musical

## WHAT’S INSIDE OF ME

We walk this weary world half dead  
Trapped in bodies, thoughts locked in heads  
But outside only hold the fragility  
If only you could see inside of me.

Blood that pumps and lungs that churn,  
An engorged heart that thumps and yearns  
Arteries severely clogged  
From years of eating butter logs.

A shriveled liver soaked in gin,  
Psoriasis has worn it thin.  
A family of spiders laid a nest,  
Inside the kidney I loved best.

notation, Robeson set out to trans-pose all four minutes and thirty-three seconds of Cage’s totally silent masterwork from piano to voice. He had no inkling for tran-scribing the octaves of the piano to separate vocal registers; further-more, there was the issue of writ-ing transcriptions of total silence for innumerable permutations of vocal ensembles: mixed choirs, boy’s choirs, all-male or all-female choirs, even the more insufferable ensembles like collegiate a cappella. After several minutes of writ-ing “Everyone just shut the fuck up for this long” and photocopy-ing the pages, Robeson created his first arrangement of *4’33”* in less than an hour and showed it to his CCD instructor at the St. Therese parish in Munhall, Pennsylvania. Robeson petitioned her by writing furiously that it should be consid-ered a hymn for the next service, and if the church ever did hire a choir, it should be their first choice of commissioned music. Robeson was disappointed, but still slightly relieved, that his CCD instructor merely shook his head. “Perhaps

Seven hot dogs in my stomach.  
That was all that I could stomach.  
I had cooked eight hotdogs but alas,  
I threw up before I could munch the last.

Bones, bones, brittle bones,  
My doctor said that I am prone,  
To osteoporosis, ain't that wild.  
I have the bones of a sickly child.

All this exists below my skin,  
Which I should note is super thin.  
So before you judge my mortal facade  
Realize that I'm probably gonna be  
dead in like four or five months.

—Michael J. Wolf

I should've censored the fuck," he reflects.

Robeson's all-vocal arrangement of John Cage's "4'33" still struggles, to this day, to find any mainstream performance opportunities. "It goes to show you that you really can't shut up a singer, any singer," he writes.

While it hasn't garnered any momentum among professional, amateur, or sacred choirs, Robeson still staged his own performance at a highly politically heated Thanksgiving dinner the following year. Not only did he beseech people to watch his performance, but also he begged family members to join him in the silent performance as well. He hoped desperately for back-to-back-to-back-to-back encore performances. Predictably, no one joined him, and they were barely quiet during his performance of the piece. He called it "4'33" for *Solo Baritone*" and did not perform it formally again for several years. "I perform it informally in any situation I can," he writes, "and hope, to no avail, that others will do the same." Nevertheless, it was re-

ceived poorly among family members, and it stung him so much that he hardly participated in the game of Charades he himself requested after the performance.



It is by sheer accident more than anything else that Robeson had stumbled across the career of becoming a choral composer/conductor. He dreamed of being an astronaut to explore the deep, dark, "no one can hear you scream" silence of space, but, much to his chagrin, it appeared that operations of space-ships and satellites required com-

munication. As an advocate for the deaf, he mastered the art of American Sign Language and taught it to close family members as well. "My parents have both become hard of hearing in their old age so it ended up becoming rather invaluable; I can only hope that this condition is hereditary." He learned ASL by taking volunteer opportunities at the Jefferson School for the Deaf in Shadyside to coordinate field trips, chaperone fellow students, and coordinate fundraisers to help against the school's increasingly austere budget. Unfortunately, Robeson's reputation for being an adamantly conservative head of an LGBTQ organization, as well as his general reputation among the community as a bad spokesperson (a term he detests), his fundraising campaigns could not save the school. A wealthy benefactor three hours upstate did enroll them at low tuition rates at a school near Erie, but it caused Robeson great distress to see his friends leave him. He put on a small farewell benefit for his peers where he performed, once again, his "4'33" for *Solo Baritone*. He explained the nature of the piece and the significance of John Cage's work to the musical community, but also how it may be one of the few cross-over pieces of musical appeal to the hearing-impaired. He emphasized that he interpreted the piece as a means of musical inclusion and a heartfelt display of his own talent to give the fondest farewell he could muster. His performance ended with the raucous sign-language equivalent of applause (it involves putting your hands near your ears and rotating your wrists back and forth). He said the joy of performance in that context was a revelation. "It cemented for me a belief that music is very much reliant on this notion of context. The best music functions within an appropriate context, like a Cage work in a school for the deaf. It is what bothered me greatly about the national anthem, and it is what so reinvigorated me about my perfor-



*“And the Lord saith, ‘Ding.’”*

mance for these wonderful people. It moved me greatly, and indeed I wept, but I wept quietly, because I’m not a hypocrite.” Robeson occasionally visits his peers from those days still, many of whom still reside near Lake Erie.

Robeson opted not to go to college for fear of having to endure more endless and purposeless lectures, instead committing to a relationship with a mute woman. Sally Redfield and Robeson met at a bar where she had been signaling the bartender without words or overt gestures what she desired to drink. “Her taste in alcohol was as impeccable as her command of body language,” he wrote. Later he discovered that the bartender was a cousin of hers and that Sally and her cousin had developed a close bond growing up. Their non-verbal communication skills were truly superb. He writes:

It seemed to me that Sally, at first, had created a bewitching spell that could compel the bartender to follow her command. Each cocktail that came by: one

seemed like an old-fashioned, another a Last Word, the last a Tiki drink...I was amazed at how she could summon such elaborate instructions with no word usage at all. She understood sign language and explained to me how she had developed a sort of intimate language with her cousin who did not ever learn ASL. I yearned for this communion of silence and ached for a romantic equivalent to their platonic affiliations. I suppose it is a bit sentimental to label the pursuit of wholly non-verbal communication sentimental, but I can feel the feelings I wish to feel when I’m not faced with the prospect of talking or hearing others talk.

Sally did indeed charm Robeson; they had dated for a year and a half before Sally broke it off. Redfield claims that Robeson desired her condition more than her companionship as a person. She recalls telling him that she was concerned that he didn’t care about what she might want to say to him. He misunderstood the implication and responded, “Precisely.” Robeson had written boastfully to friends how perfect she was, but could not decouple her perfection from how much money he claimed he was

saving on earplugs. “It made me not mind paying for dinner,” he once gaffed, “so shouldn’t that be a plus?” Redfield claimed that she had told Robeson over and over that she was discontent with the loss of her voice, that it was impossible for him to empathize with her. To Sally, Robeson had the privilege to speak when needed. He lived in the comfort of knowing it was a tool he had the choice to utilize; for Sally, her voice was taken from her altogether. She felt terrified to tell Robeson that she would have liked to sing, or speak, one day, and she never disclosed this to him. She grew distant and afraid, and broke up with him. He understood why immediately. “I wanted her to feel like I could love her for how she was now, and I did not want her to feel that she needed to be someone else for anybody,” Robeson writes, “but at the same time I cannot change someone’s inner yearning, whether it be for quiet or for noise.” They parted ways and remain acquaintances at best. “It was an amicable break-up; indeed, there was no shouting.”

Robeson, like Cage, had experimented with sensory deprivation, and was greatly surprised to discover the loudness that the inner ear concocts when totally deprived of any sound. With the crushing realization that total sensory deprivation can still yield the existence of loud, neurologically triggered voices, he realized that composing sound rather than detesting any sound was impractical. Furthermore, the realization that his first love may have wished to sing one day gave him someone to write to and for. In short, he began writing choral pieces for her. His pieces include an all-consonant aria named for the band !!! (Chk Chk Chk), a chamber work for soprano and whoopee cushion (PFFFFFFTTTT), and his only politically charged song cycle (K K K). Robeson believed that even if a voice could not muster pitch, it could at least use the exhalation of air and the positioning of the throat to create

consonants. She never performed these works, and when she later died from tuberculosis during a safari gone awry, he wrote a solo soprano piece consisting entirely of coughs (TB). Robeson calls it the most creative period of his career, but also the most innocent. His work, due to being labeled as “edgy” or “controversial” (despite not being the work’s intent), meant that musicologists, composers, and the blogosphere alike had plenty to talk about when they attended his concerts.

“I couldn’t stand how they talked, for a variety of reasons,” Robeson wrote. “They claimed to know what my intentions were in writing these works without any information about me at all. They discussed what its historical significance was as if it was particularly important. They cultivated their personal and private opinions on my works in the least private and personal way imaginable: they opened their mouths.” Robeson was not averse to receiving criticism for his work; he just preferred a different means of delivery: “I can read it, sure. Sometimes I even get aggravated at the little voice in my head as I read, but, I can read it. I’ll live.” He understands that the person he wrote many of these works for will not be able to sing them, nor hear them. It was clear to me how much he still loved her. In our correspondence I asked him about his failed attempts to reconnect with Sally Redfield after they separated but before she died. He replied, beautifully, with one sentence: “I don’t want to talk about it.”

**R**OBESON DOES NOT partake in many of the events that take place in the choral community. He is considered aloof and reclusive, arrogant and condescending. He travels alone rather than with the members of the choir who had commissioned him for fear of impromptu sing-alongs and “the general histrionics of an assembly of singers.” He strongly prefers correspondence via e-mail to discuss-



*“You share your inner thoughts, and I don’t share my silent retorts.”*

ing the performance of the work in-person. Attending premieres of his work has actually become less burdensome for him since the advent of the smartphone: “People stare at their phones and do not engage in small talk before or after concerts. So be it if they are distracted; I relish what smartphones have done for killing conversation.” He is known to sometimes ask smaller venues to withhold any announcements regarding turning off cell-phones, and is more known for requiring the distribution of cough drops during performances of TB. “No singing along,” he demands. He performs fairly often and has shunned conducting altogether, oftentimes performing K K K to Schools for the Deaf nationwide. He does this by introducing the piece and its personal significance for him—“It is called significance,” he once signed to a crowd, “not speechificance.” He calls his performance of K K K a “transcription for the deaf”: he signs the letter at varying intervals. Occasionally he

allows fellow lip-readers to make the sound with him, but he tends to perform with earplugs for those. During these performances, Robeson typically concludes the piece by signing the word “Redfield” and bowing, and has even notated this in his score (also dedicated to the late Redfield).

Robeson is currently negotiating the release of audio and video for these community-oriented performances of K K K, which have garnered high demand among educators of deaf persons not only for their socially conscious undertones, but also for helping younger students to master the alphabet. “Each performance is different based on how each person can perceive and utter the word K,” Robeson writes. “Or so they say. I wouldn’t know; I don’t really listen to it.” *Deutsche Grammophon* has shown interest in branding Robeson’s catalogue as children’s music, a label which Robeson neither accepts nor rejects. He has said very little on the subject, for obvious reasons. ♦

PORTFOLIO

## PART AND PARCEL

*A look into the current state of the  
United States Postal Service*

BY KADY RUTH ASHCRAFT  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
KADY RUTH ASHCRAFT

A PHYSICAL PIECE of mail in this day is as rare as a finding a slice of white stilton gold on a charcuterie plate. The tangible form of correspondence is more a quaint, kitsch statement than anything convenient or practical. Yet still today there are almost 25 operating post offices in the United States alone. Chaos and misgovernance have made their home in what used to be the communication polestar of our country. Take a look at the activity occurring within these all but abandoned premises.

*According to research done by Millicent Reeves, the leading analyst in vagrants who won't leave the post office, a single letter can take up to 13 weeks to be sent back to the sender for no apparent reason.*







*A large percentage of post office patrons are of the belief that post offices are banks. This has led*



*to the financial demolition of a few small towns as well as a number of unsuccessful heists.*

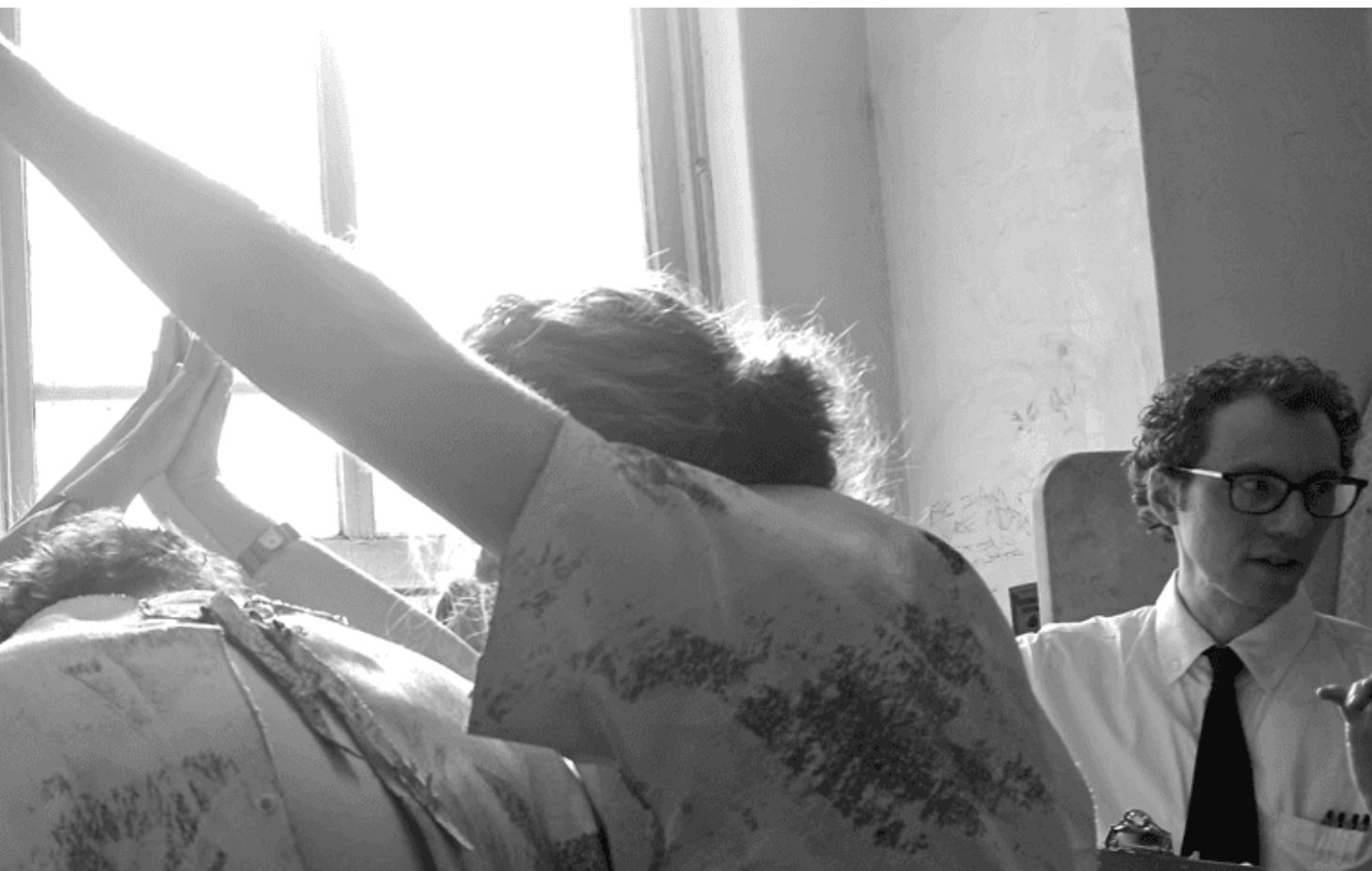


*In one post office that remains open but underused in Floyd, Kentucky, a small cult has been renting the empty mailrooms*





*to cleanse and abuse their members. It's a profitable way to keep the doors open and engage with the community.*



## THE HERO SCOURGE

*Once, caped crusaders were eager to protect Gotham. Now, they harm more than heal.*

BY DANIEL SARGEANT

AS 1980 DREW to a close, New York found itself in the midst of a crime epidemic. Statistics from the era sketch a grim landscape: there were 1.6 switchblades per adult resident in Manhattan, 3.3 sets of brass knuckles per household citywide. Children as young as five reported to kindergarten, if they reported at all, in tiny leather jackets, and were often found concealing lengths of chain in their lunchboxes. Three in five primary school students reported having at least one tattoo.

The cityscape at nightfall underwent a harrowing transformation. Parks and alleyways festered with criminality. Rats began to travel in packs for safety; several muggers admitted to having more than once attempted to assault what turned out to be a mound of rats stacked into a human-like shape and wearing a trenchcoat. These “plague scarecrows” still carried—and could reportedly fire—handguns. Lou Reed was mugged for looking too healthy.

Gangs franchised their brands and parcelled out the city, a strategy said to have later inspired David Chang’s Milk Bar. The 1979 release of *The Warriors* single-handedly created thirty crews of independent, distinctly outfitted, weaponized outlaws, each with their own catchphrases and pidgin dialect. The often anemic NYPD gave way to full-blown lethargy; most cops settled into a simple life, collecting protection payoffs from locals. Even those officers with higher moral callings often opted to enter into pacts with one another; they would wound one another with their service revolvers and take their pensions early.

The city was, by all accounts, in need of a hero. It got several.

January 1st, 1980, was the first day in a decade of excess. That morning, police precincts throughout lower Manhattan reported being overwhelmed with intake paperwork. Bundles of

criminals, many still wearing narrow masks and all black unitards, were found on police station stoops. Each group was wrapped in thick longshoreman’s rope, eight to twelve criminals each, bouquets of vagrants deposited by erstwhile crime-fighting romantics. In between whines about the need for overtime pay, the desk jockeys of the NYPD began taking statements. Demand was such that drums of fingerprint ink had to be bused in from North Jersey.

Each criminal confessed to petty crimes, ranging from low-level burglary to attempted arson. They admitted to ongoing gang activity. They offered their bosses, their routes, their best practices, in exchange for as much jail time as they could get. The bureaucratic underpinnings of their organizations, internal politics, minor grievances. More information than could ever have been required by the police. Weird foods their bosses would get angry about at lunch. They spat it all up in their statements, their complexions pale. Something in their apprehension had stirred fear. Most were eager to talk about the man who had captured them. Their stories were all similar. At the moment in their approach when their crime turned from mere intent to cold execution, a figure wrapped in skintight lycra appeared from above, muttered a pun-heavy witicism, and cold cocked them. They recalled being dragged, begging for their lives, unsure of how to handle their new role as prey. Each was told the same pithy platitudes in gruff tones: that this was the beginning of a new dawn, that the city’s virus now had a cure. Several hoodlums who had turned to crime after abandoning advanced literature degrees were clocked a second time for rolling their eyes.

Over the next few evenings, then through the months and into Spring, the police learned that they had to decide whether these new crimefighters

were their cooperatives or their competition. It emerged that what the police had dismissed as a group delusion among feeble minds had instead been the first rumblings of a new cadre of vigilantes possessed of means and abilities that far outstripped those of the NYPD. The busloads of new Sing Sing residents reported that the men they encountered seemed unencumbered by gravity. They were exceptionally cunning, and said so, out loud, while delivering uppercuts to flummoxed henchmen, literally describing themselves as “exceptionally cunning.”

Oscar Calmenti, one of the earliest to be rounded up by what he later learned was Batman, spent eight years at Rikers after pleading out. He, like most of those captured in early 1980, pled out his sentence without realizing how little usable evidence was actually attached to his case. He instead believed merely that he would be assaulted again if he attempted to commit a crime. The trauma of his apprehension lingers in his daily life. A free man for almost thirty years, he still cannot bring himself to travel through any shaded, narrow space without experiencing vertigo. Since his arrest, he talks exactly like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo after having seen a ghost.

“I was a dumb kid,” Calmenti said recently over a croissant at a Midtown Magnolia Bakery. “Sure, I was snatching purses. I served my time. But did I deserve to be humiliated? The police found me on a flagpole hanging from my briefs. I was incoherent for months. Remembering the outfit, I felt like I’d been picked up by a rogue S&M dungeon gimp. That’s not stopping crime, that’s gloating.”

With the Giuliani era still a decade away, the NYPD chose to ignore a problem that has only festered with age. The criminals wondered then, as the city does now: isn’t vigilantism a crime of its own? Regardless of their origins



ILLUSTRATION BY JUAN LEGUIZAMON

*The current iteration of New York City is unrecognizable to those who fled during the decades of decline.*

and their intent, can super heroes really be permitted to act outside the law, even in order to enforce it? Could we even stop them if we wanted? How do we do justice to a Justice League?

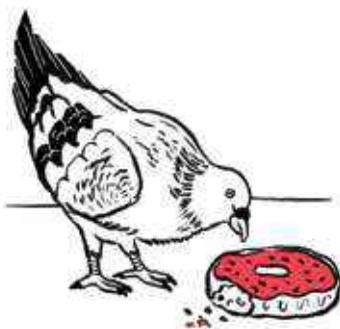
THE CURRENT ITERATION of New York City is unrecognizable to those who fled during the decades of decline. The contemporary Disney version of Manhattan owes much of its image to a citywide cleanup effort in which superheroes played no small role. Indeed, petty crime remains low, thanks primarily to ongoing police intervention tactics, championed in the 90's by Commissioner William Bratton and still in effect today. Broken windows policies that held sway through the Giuliani and Bloomberg eras remain effective (if controversial) and community outreach programs have proven effective at stemming juvenile crime in low-income areas. Minor violence and larceny, combatting which was once the stock-in-trade of superheroes, has now largely become a manageable nuisance, kept in check by the city and its residents without the intervention of mutant and alien do-gooders. Citizens are left to wonder, then, what exactly is prompting the super heroes to linger.

While minor crime has been more or less eradicated, other historically unheard-of issues now threaten the average New Yorker. With superheroes come supervillains. Instead of subway muggings, city residents now cope with the semi-annual threat of nuclear holocaust. Commutes are regularly thrown into disarray as interdimensional portals manifest in the Canarsie and Montague MTA tunnels. Bridges over the East River are demolished with alarming regularity. Mad scientists have engineered the redirection of comets, setting them on a course for Gotham. Residents pine for days when they merely had to watch knife-wielding vagrants soil themselves on the walk to Zabar's.

Nemeses of the superheroes have prompted the heroes themselves to become commuters. Having made their homes along the Hudson, the heroes see little of the city they protect. Superman has been known to refuse to accommodate others on Metro North, claiming some alien gravity-related

reason for needing an additional seat. Spider-Man carpools with a handful of fawning Goldman Sachs interns. As a result, the heroes themselves do not engage with the fallout of their heroism. In Brooklyn, what environmentalists are calling a "wrathful colony of vicious ammonia-based lifeforms" has begun emerging from the Gowanus, long a dumping ground for the interplanetary flotsam that results from Superman's battles in the stratosphere. The superfund site lies thirty-one miles from the Justice League's 'downstate' headquarters at Kykuit, the former Rockefeller residence acquired by Wayne Industries in 1999.

Skeptics have long argued that any gratitude the city might have for Spider-Man and company's headline-making heroics, their lack of follow-through—at best—undoes any goodwill. At worst, it prompts resentment in locals: a secret wish that the magic & wonder superheroes draw upon had never been discovered. As the city enjoys its respite from the crime on which these heroes made their name, the destruction that accompanies these new misadventures (and



the attendant rebuilding costs) comes without any ability to seek redress. The city can hardly seek restitution from a group with no fixed name, let alone discover the tax standing of any of the Justice League's membership. The complex legal architecture undergirding each superhero's consists of a host of FEINs and LLCs, each with limited assets. Wonder Woman is technically an S-Corp but files as a 501(c)(3). There appears to be larger reasons than mere humility for these figures' insistence on hiding their identities. As city advocate Letitia James said in a recent address, "For years, we have heard that ours

was a city in need of saving, and various caped men have offered their version of aid. But now we sit frustrated, with the less glamorous ongoing work of rebuilding before us, and no heroes stepping forward."

Of particular interest in this era of gentrification is something lower-income residents have long known: our league of white, wealthy, male heroes has something of an allergy to the outer boroughs. And yet the same decrease in crime has occurred even in neighborhoods the Bugle's resident hero-beat shutterbug Peter Parker has never had cause to photograph.

"There's no real incentive to commit crimes here anymore, but I don't think Batman or whoever has anything to do with it," Bedford-Stuyvesant community leader Anjelica Odom said at a recent luncheon honoring her and others who have worked to rebuild the inner city. "We've just grown up as a community, gained a little political autonomy, found a financial foothold. Of course property values are rising, for better or worse. Frankly, we've benefited from being out of the [heroes'] war path, so to speak."

As early as 1982, however, community leaders were speaking out about the heroes' tendency to save victims that resembled themselves. The Reverend Al Sharpton, speaking at a Morningside Heights rally, had this to say: "And yet, our community remains somehow terra incognita for these so-called heroes. As afflicted as our neighborhoods are with just the kind of crime these masked marauders treat as their bread and butter, we all see the front pages. We know what kind of victims make the news. We know that there are self-mythologizing egos at work here." Sharpton was eventually cut off by a Kool Herc break that sampled audio of Batman tripping over a curbstone.

And, indeed, documenting these crime-fighting exploits has put local media on the journalistic map. In a recent op-ed for the *Daily Planet*, former cub reporter Clark Kent bragged at length about building his career on early exclusives and first-hand accounts. Though veteran reporters are often tempted to revere the past, Kent's nostalgia reads as dangerously rose-tinted, given Superman's recent



*"You know what I really don't mind? Toiling in obscurity."*

sinking of Roosevelt Island (and its 9,500 residents). Bloviation aside, the city's newspapers have long struggled with a credibility gap as concerns the heroes. In an email, Times editor Sam Sifton wrote: "In a field that subsists so totally on access, it's no wonder some of the local dailies opt for reverence rather than investigation, let alone criticism. Particularly when it comes to people who can literally lift buildings, reporters feel compelled to give at least a little bit of a tugjob."

More damning by far is developers' growing reliance on the city's ongoing destruction. Given the overwhelming demand, the city and its property owners have been forced to offer no-bid contracts to builders and engineering firms. Unable to successfully raise taxes on an increasingly depressed populace, the city has plunged into debt while its white-collar residents have invested in local development and flourished as a result. Donald Trump, inevitably, found himself locked in bankruptcy proceedings

after hiring uninsured contractors for cleanup following hero-related building destruction; the development tycoon has filed suit and publicly sworn that "those queers in capes are gonna pay through the nose."

Larger companies have come to see New York as a metropolitan test tube. Wayne Industries, which operated in the red throughout the 70's and 80's, has recorded profits every year since being tapped to consult on the rebuilding of the MTA lines in 1991. "New York offers us a unique opportunity to test low-yield production runs of new high-efficiency materials before going into full production," said a Wayne executive who did not wish to be named. "We can try out a new polymer or material and see how it fares in the few years it stays in place. Should it not prove out in real-world conditions, it won't be long before a weaponized solar flare or acidic cloudburst destroys it anyway."

Recently, protests against the superheroes' continued residency have begun

popping up. A small tent community has reformed in Zuccotti Park, with protesters holding placards with slogans like "Flying Heroes Are Corporate Welfare." Effigies of Batman hang from lamp-posts. A recent statement from the occupiers reads, in part, "Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man have long generated and attracted far more crime than they ever thwarted. We ask only that they let the city carry on in peace." Mike Daisey, the disgraced playwright and monologist known for his later-retracted pieces indicting Apple, has recently begun previews for a new show entitled "Waiter, There's a Utility Belt in My Soup."

City comptroller Scott Stringer echoed these sentiments recently, saying, "If they could truly eradicate crime, they would have by now. The simple fact is they need crime to exist in order to thrive, and so have a vested interest in keeping our citizens unstable and unsafe." Shortly afterward, a lawsuit on behalf of the city was brought against the LLC under which the League maintains most of its financial holdings. The damages, according to those briefed on the sealed documents, were listed as incalculable. Buried within the suit are searing allegations regarding high-level collusion between Wall Street and the Justice League. It has been dismissed as unenforceable and frivolous by Justice League PR representatives.

IT WAS NOT always thus. Throughout the 80's, the NYPD and the superheroes operated in a kind of grudging detente. As violent crime numbers plummeted, Superman would often appear alongside Police Commissioner Devine and Mayor Koch at press conferences, fielding questions. Behind closed doors, Batman was said to be "highly cooperative" and "hardly a dictator" when it came to evidence-sharing. Spider-Man reportedly filed thorough statements, with photograph documentation, and would often request and deliver his own lab work. Crime figures looked like they fell off a shelf; the city thrived. Aquaman, with a growing excess of time on his hands, briefly joined Devo as bassist before forming a No Wave band of his own, The Watery Graves.

A pressure valve had been released,

with the accumulated toxic energy of decades of stagnation billowing off of the city. Quality of life increased ten percent or more each year from 1983 through 1990. The Justice League seemed genuinely to enjoy interacting with the city's residents. Most Thursdays in 1985 Spider-Man could be found volunteering at the Bowery Mission, while Batman cut the ribbon on the city's first needle exchange depot, across from Katz's in what is now (no kidding) a gelato laboratory.

High-profile arrests of crime bosses and gang leaders spurred the city into a state of devotion and adulation. "It was an incredible time to be in the ticker tape trade," confetti supplier Randolph Particity recalled. "We were making money hand over fist, between the near-weekly parade prep, and then getting the cleanup for the same parade funneled through a sister company we created for private sanitation. God, New Yorkers love a parade."

Documents from the era highlight the heroes' continued efforts to eradicate crime, but with few outwardly sinister forces remaining in New York, the usual suspects were nowhere to be found. Instead, as the excesses of the financial sector began to bloom, Superman and others found themselves bedevilled not by typical henchmen but instead at the mercy of cocaine-addled day traders. Attempts to infiltrate the arena of white-collar crime were met handily by executives and financiers. Batman, in one infamous photograph, is pictured helping hedge fund manager Steven Cohen select a Basquiat from Larry Gagosian's downtown gallery; in full mask and regalia, Batman sips an espresso. Gagosian recalled him as a neophyte, "badmouthing primitivism, had this weird hard-on for early Koons. His check cleared, at least."

Adrift in a decade that privileged greed and doubted morality, Spider-Man found himself sunk into a depression, his moral compass skewed. Often considered a sulk among his peers, and among the least respected among the public, the webslinger lashed out. He was among the first to identify and pursue "crime against the environment," locating and removing toxic sludge and barrels of chemical waste only to deposit them on the Hamptons lawns of

industry executives. Such an interest in exacerbating the frustrations of the elite was not lost on Spider-Man's colleagues, who removed him to an upstate "sanatorium" for a period of drying out. During this time he supposedly learned to code; his online aliases all played off his own relations to webs and web-related activity. It was an early rumbling of internal discord. Their hands exposed, the heroes attempted to maintain an appearance of fealty to the city, but skeptical New Yorkers had already begun to notice a downtick in the quality of service.

"I STARTED BUSTING muggers again in, let's see, 1988?" said Detective Travis "Garlic" Caliendo, a thirty-year veteran of the police force. "It was strange—we'd grown accustomed to someone swooping in from above to get the collar. Even as I hustled after this first purse snatcher, I figured I'd see a grappling hook fly by my face. At that

point, it was custom: you'd show up and Batman would swoop in and do the rest."

The NYPD's cooperation with superheroes relied on non-interference: the heroes attack, the police clean up. "That first time, I got back to collect the victim, and she's mad at me. Just totally loses it. She thought she was going in the newspaper, wanted her fifteen minutes. I said, 'lady, I just used my service revolver for the first time, that punk's walking with a limp the rest of his life,' and she starts swatting at me with her umbrella!" Caliendo gazed down at his styrofoam as he squeezed excess water from a teabag. "Ended up having to bring her in too. This city, I don't know sometimes. I think I was better off when all we did was tickle hippies."

As the 90's came barreling towards New York, the tone of the Justice League shifted away from the local and personal and more towards the distant

I can't remember how it goes.  
Some lilting melody...  
licking, arching, aching bones that crack,  
and lightning bolts in red and blue  
etched across her back

My love was a quiet one,  
A thrusting by the river  
Rustling in the summer breeze  
But hushing as the thrushes sang.  
Eager always, on my knees.

These days I keep to corridors,  
Perverted eyes averted.  
Some speed machines were built to rust  
Windshield cracked by swallow's teeth,  
Fenders bent by bulky bucks.

I fear the others have it worse.  
How could they ever dance again?  
Silk shoes hung up on the mantle,  
These spinster reminisce besides the fire  
Of the one far too hot to handle.

—Michael J. Wolf

and cynical. Altruistic in their actions, the heroes proved themselves not above financial temptation in the form of endorsements. A line of Reebok sneakers, an early Gatorade variant, at least two Jitney buses—there were few places the Justice League wouldn't permit its image, for the right price. An over-the-top marketing campaign for Superman-branded "Hypercolor" shirts required the man of steel to circle the Brooklyn bridge at supersonic speed, creating a Christo & Jeanne-Claude-esque heat-sensitive drapery. The city had not been contacted regarding appropriate permitting, and early news reports suggested the bridge itself was being fumigated without warning. Panic ensued. Dozens leapt from the bridge into the January frost blanketing the East River.

Pioneering urban theorist Jane Jacobs described this transitional time in an essay for *Harper's*, saying: "those figures we once imagined capable of reorienting our experience of the Manhattan landscape have instead been consumed by it, as surely they feared would be the result all along. The city shifts hegemonically; those forces which hoped to transform it are themselves transformed, utterly, beyond recognition. The onward march of capital tames us all." In a letter to the editor, local business magnate Bruce Wayne declared Jacobs a "tired old biddy" who "couldn't make friends with people" so "hung out with bricks instead." The inchoate flame war between the scholar and the tycoon was nipped in the bud when Jacobs declared her intention never to leave Toronto, in disgust at what she called "the end of New York as we have known it. The slums have been cleared. Long live the new slums."

To most New Yorkers, the final true act of heroism the heroes brought to the city was the foiling of the 1993 attempt on the Twin Towers. An intense collaboration between local, federal, and superhuman abilities, the ultimate result involved the inert detonation of the terrorists' weapon in a garage beneath the towers that had reportedly been reinforced by a material composed of contributions from each of the "marquee" heroes—Batman, Spider-Man, Superman. Unfortunately, for reasons of national security, the breadth of the collaboration was kept secret. The ensu-

ing lack of media coverage exposed the heroes' long-simmering vanity. Without the torrent of credit and goodwill that commonly accompanied their exploits, the superficial benefits of altruism dissolved altogether. The three met atop the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge later that evening. Having each separately received the key to the city at various points throughout the 80's, the three individually heaved their golden keys as far into the bay as possible. This act of childlike defiance was ridiculed as "obnoxious" in the *Post*. Pat Kiernan did a deep-voiced impression of a simpering baby Batman on the following evening's NY1 news broadcast.

THE DECLINE IN hero popularity throughout the 90's was an inverse reflection of the success of the Giuliani era. Conservative and controversial to some, the strict enforcement of on-the-books laws by the police department overtook the daring escapades of the 80's. The efficacy of Commissioner Bratton's ends-justify-the-means broken windows policing drove crime to its lowest rate on record. A period of peace settled into the waning days of the Clinton administration; the US as a nation unknowingly grew complacent and vulnerable. The superheroes, suspiciously, became the target of threats altogether unknown on the earth. New York transitioned; for more than a generation, gang activity, mafia violence, and other acts of pedestrian violence had remained the greatest threat to everyday citizens. Now, however, evil geniuses were becoming common. Intergalactic terrorists, bearing no real grievance with the people of the metropolis, began targeting New York.

The heroes found their way back to the front pages, but this time the papers struggled to find a vocabulary for the threat that was being repelled. Nor, indeed, did the city's myriad salvations come with much closure. Threats became increasingly inconceivable beforehand, and the city began to fear most attacks from things it couldn't yet imagine. In one highly publicized incident, Superman reversed the rotation of the planet in order to turn back time. This later revealed itself to be merely an attempt to whitewash a disastrous oversight on the crusader's part, a heroic

do-over that caused thousands of New Yorkers to be committed to state psychiatric institutions for what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-V) refers to as "time madness." While the initial oversight may have cost untold lives, the mayor, having lost his wife to the "hourglass curse," implored of the heroes: "No mulligans. No do-overs. If you're going to put us all in danger, just get it right. Now, please excuse me. I have to inject my wife with vertigo medication."

It might be uncouth to mention that on 9/11 the heroes were attending a "message coordination" summit at an underground bunker on the moon. That said, few New Yorkers fail to recall Superman's appearance at Shea Stadium at the first ball game following the attacks. Invited to throw out the first pitch, as a unifying act for the city, the Man of Steel was booed by a sold-out crowd of 14,000. In response, Superman heaved the ball at a record 311 mph. A hole in Mike Piazza's catcher's mitt glowed red at the edges. The hall of famer wears a glass eye to this day.

"It was just such an act of childishness, at the worst possible moment," said veteran Met player and current commentator Keith Hernandez. "I still refer to it as the second most tragic day of that month. And coming just a season after the Subway Series. Just pathetic."

NOT LONG AGO, in December 2012, a group of henchmen loyal to one of Batman's nemeses attempted to ignite the ozone above Long Island. The effort was foiled, not by the dark knight but rather by road closures and debris buildup related to superstorm Sandy. Unable to coordinate effectively, the henchmen were picked up in a routine search at a National Guard checkpoint outside near the Rockville Centre LIRR stop. Recovery efforts had been in effect since the storm's arrival in late October, but superhero involvement in cleanup had been minimal. Sources close to President Obama say he was approached about a photo opp with the heroes but declined, citing a need to appear above reproach in the midst of an election.

The appearance of any costumed adult in the New York sky is now a cause for alarm—an indication that trouble is on the way. People immediately seek

shelter, assuming high-altitude destruction and its attendant falling objects are on the way. Some ex-New Yorkers, priced out of their neighborhoods, claim that they could never be beckoned back to the city. "Honestly? I've been in Passaic for three years now and no one has threatened to incinerate my block in exchange for something they will only mysteriously refer to as 'the device,' you know? There's the usual New York bullshit that you don't see anywhere else, and then there's the shit these guys attract," said former Upper West Side resident Hugo Carbine, an ophthalmologist whose family lived in New York for generations. "I like that I can get my kid to school without the fuselage of an alien craft slamming into Amsterdam Avenue."

Carbine echoed what many high-profile New Yorkers have said about leaving the city. Many celebrities now make their homes in the tri-state area outside the city limits, and chalk their departures up to more than just relaxed tax codes in New Jersey and Connecticut. "I like having a yard. I like that I won't be kidnapped and used as a token in an intergalactic hostage trade," said former New Yorker Chris Rock. "I like that I can walk my dog without being

ensorceled by beams of light in a color my mind cannot comprehend. Maybe it's just me, but damn."

Recent local elections highlighted the discord; the mayoral candidates in 2013 at times competed to see who could distance themselves the most from the Justice League. For their part, the heroes seem to have no intention of moving on to greener, less populated pastures. Indeed, with the exception of Spider-Man, the heroes appear to have retired to a life among Manhattan's upper crust, with Superman recently spotted at Per Se dining with David Koch and former Mayor Bloomberg. Reportedly, Superman's temper flared up over a disagreement about sentencing and prison conditions in the United States. Long a champion of privatizing incarceration, the Man of Steel reportedly coughed a butter-poached lobster tail through a window and into the center of Columbus Circle's globe. Batman recently appeared on Meet the Press, insisting that "the United States needs to build the wall, and Wayne Industries is the company to do it." Long suspected of xenophobia, Batman has refused to stop crime in Queens since the mid-80's, saying "they should take care of their own," and refusing to

elaborate. Never formally inducted into the League, Spider-Man appears to be suffering a crisis of conscience, having enlisted with the UN as a global ambassador. He was most recently spotted chatting with Bono on a fact-finding mission in Central Africa.

And so New York persists, burdened by those most suited to protect us. Though the daily services of superheroes have ceased, and a criminal element has crept back into everyday life, the NYPD's statistics-based models tend to be just as effective in ongoing violent crime prevention. When a major crime slips through their grasp, Superman et al. hold it up as an example of their ongoing necessity; when a crime is thwarted, regardless of how, they muscle their way onstage to take the credit. Average New Yorkers now shrug off their antics as though talking about any other local crackpot. Altruism has given way to solipsism. And every foiled plot becomes transmuted into another advertisement for how doomed we would be without the heroes' assistance. In-house and contract brand managers for the Justice League, including Karl Rove, articulate a message of the city's ongoing need for protection, a rehash of the messaging used to re-elect Bush.

Yet the heroes bring as much threat as anyone else. The tactics that helped make this city safe have grown old, and perhaps the end justified the means. But what about after the end? New York finds itself in the same situation as Iraq. Ravaged by a destructive overreaction to a bad situation, wondering how to rebuild, forced to lean on the very influences that wrought the destruction in the first place. The currency in New York now is fear. Children travel to school in buses reinforced with kevlar and explosion-resistant glass, protection in case overhead war should break out. The subway system continues to undergo its first revamping in decades, but the bulk of the money is going to protection from forces underneath the tunnels, where Batman's nemeses make their lairs. Quality of life is at its lowest since at least the Lindsay administration. These heroes stepped in to assist us where a feckless police force could not. But now that they no longer need to protect, will they ever serve? ♦



*"Yeah, I know. But there's always a little voice in my head saying, 'You're not so super.'"*

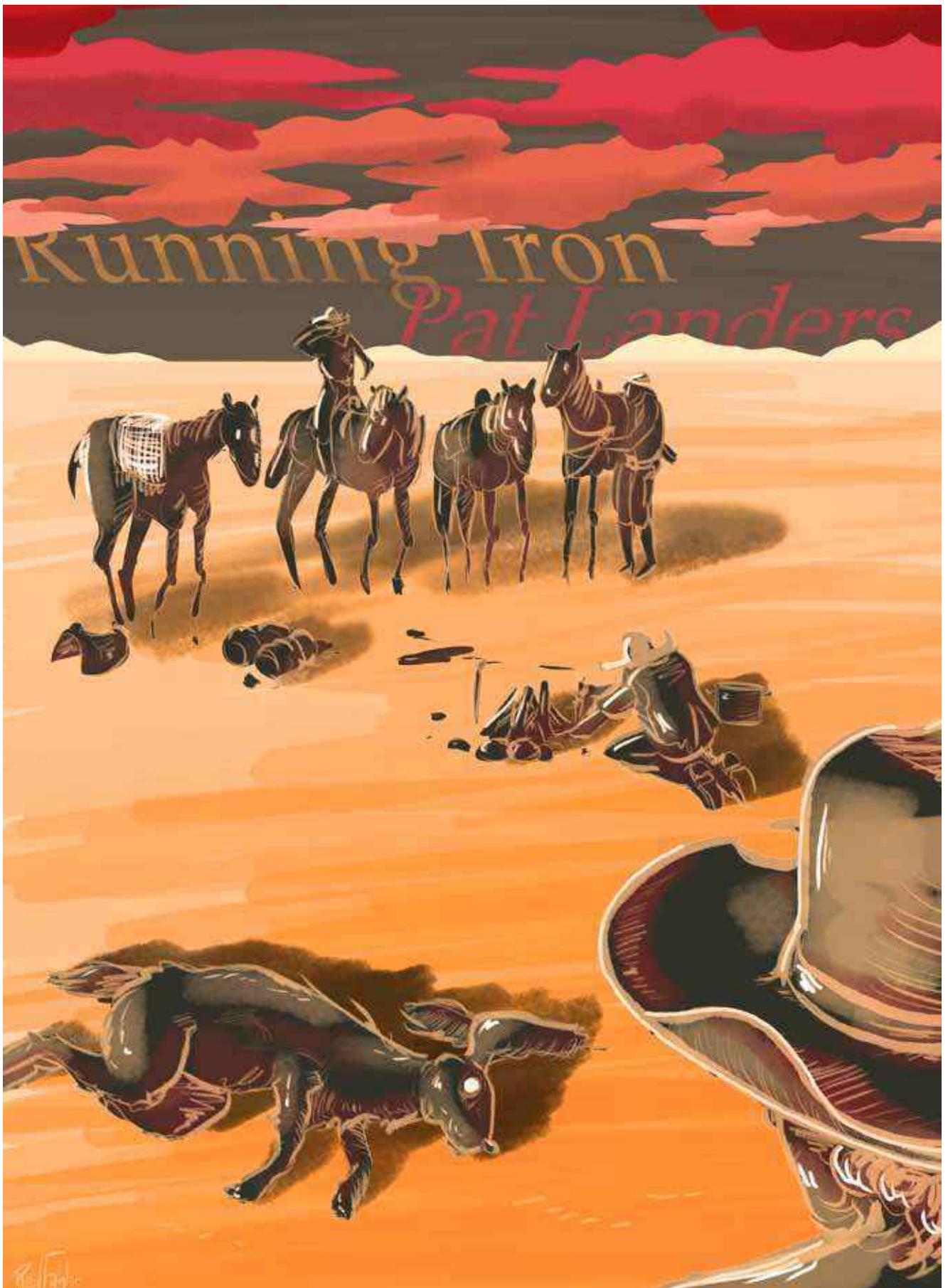
# PRAISE

# THE LOOF

A hand with purple nail polish is shown holding a white, textured loofah sponge. The hand is positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers wrapped around the loofah. The background is a light, neutral color.

YOUR LIFE JUST CHANGED FOR THE BETTER. ALL SCRUB CLUB<sup>®</sup> BASIC BOXES<sup>™</sup> NOW SHIP WITH OUR PREMIUM-QUALITY SCRUB+PLUS<sup>™</sup> LOOFAHS.

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THEY HAD LEFT the scablands weeks ago. Had traded a shrub-dotted landscape for one of powdery dust mottled with grass and the occasional sagebrush that reminded them of a dog with mange. It was a hard, empty land. The only other living things they'd seen for weeks were beetles in the food and lice in their clothes.

The path went southeast, corralled between two mountain ranges. The only breezes to be had were hot, dry, and coated everything with dust. Their hands, faces, throats, and eyes were all stung by it. The horses had painful sores beneath their saddles.

Each morning the big man put on a red tie that turned pale pink before the sun had broken free of the horizon. He rode ahead of the rest, picking out a path with practiced ease. The slit back of his battered cavalry coat laid smoothly over the horse's flanks.

Behind him was Grady. He'd been from a city once, but no longer. All he'd kept was a pipe and a vest coat with a cameo brooch in the waist pocket. Sat lightly in his saddle, his shadow stretched ahead of him as the sun fell towards evening.

On this particular evening they saw a modest church a ways down the trail. Stacked stones made a small room with a rough wooden cross on an eave. When they came closer, they saw it was burnt. Grady started the speculation.

"Bandits," said Grady, "they'd burn up the world if they could."

"It wasn't any bandits, the folk in that church burned it themselves," said Hoke. He rode a gouch-eared horse. His hat was battered, and his clothes stiff with sweat.

"Why would anyone burn up their own church?"

"Religious ecstasy," said Hoke, saying the words like they were borrowed. "They got all swept up in their sermon. Speaking in tongues, trembling with the holy spirit. But then it goes different."

"How does that make them burn up their church?" said the kid, riding alongside the two.

"Some fool knocks over a candle,

and starts a fire. Maybe catches himself on fire. Everyone else thinks it's the divine plan and sets fires of their own. The place goes up like a pyre, because the Lord helps those who help themselves."

The kid thought. With a thin face and fair hair, coated in dust, he looked like a balsa wood doll. "I think it was lightning," he said.

"That wasn't any lightning, I'm telling you it was bandits."

"Even bandits wouldn't burn a church, not unless they had gold. But that church didn't even have windows."

"I'd bet my horse it was bandits."

"You could bet your boots if you hadn't lost them at dice two weeks gone," said Hoke.

"I'm not betting my boots, I'm betting my horse."

"It was soldiers." The big man had rejoined them. His white hair framed his weatherworn face in ringlets, like a cherub grown old. He rode on without further dissembling.

The others were silent. Soon enough they had passed the church and seen the other side. The wall had been dynamited and collapsed inward. The roof on that side sagged close to the ground like a man tipping his hat. Dark stains ran from inside the church into the crater outside. A buzzard had gotten itself caught in a priest's robes. Its head poked out grotesquely through the collar as it hopped and flapped, trying to escape.

They kept riding until after sunset.

When it was too dark to ride safely they made a rough camp. The kid gathered scrub wood to make a fire. He sang, clear and high, while he searched.

Out by the bedrolls, Hoke brushed down the horses.

Grady set up the stew pot and set to kindling a fire. He piled the fire higher as the kid brought more wood.

The big man dropped two of the long-legged and scoop-eared rabbits peculiar to that part of the country next to the fire. Grady tried not to look as he prepared them.

There were never any shots when the big man went out hunting, and the rabbits had no injuries. They were just dead.

That night the kid had first watch, and the others fell asleep as he hummed in that same clear tone.



The kid found a streamlet the next morning, and whooped as he cleaned himself. Grady and the big man walked over to join, but Hoke stayed with the horses.

Clean or not, they all filled their canteens before setting out.

It was a long morning, and Hoke muttered and cursed from his saddle.

"This goddamned dust. It doesn't grind your throat raw then it half blinds you." He covered his face with his hat.



A good piece of an hour passed before Hoke's horse stumbled and bumped Grady's horse. He grabbed Hoke hard at the shoulders.

"Take that hat off and look where you're going."

"I won't. This dust bothers me more than you do."

Grady hit him. A formless gasp escaped through Hoke's hat as he hunched over, braced against his cantele.

He took slow breaths for a time, while Grady looked as far down the road as he could. Hoke slowly straightened up.

"Damned sun'd cook a cow where it stands," said Hoke. He put his hat back on his head, and gently held his stomach. He took two bullets out of a pouch on his hip and held them in his hand. As he looked at the faces he'd carved in the soft lead, his smile



*"You deserve to be dead!"*

bent the tracks his tears had left on his dusty face.

Mountain walls, too far to reach in a day's ride, penned them into this basin. Most days they saw little but those walls, stunted plants, and each other. But today they saw a cart pulled by two mules.

They led their horses off the path while the cart passed, and said their hellos to the driver, short and old and with more mules than teeth. The cart was covered with a canvas.

"What's in the cart?" said the kid.

"Bodies," said the old man. "Some folks came to town and caused trouble. Now they're leaving."

Grady snuck a look under the cover, then backed away. His face was pale, his eyes wide with fear—like a horsey.

"Look at this one!" said Hoke. He lifted the foot of one of the corpses out past the canvas. "Ain't these your boots?"

"No, those are his boots. I'm wearing my boots."

"That's the boots you lost gambling. Remember?" said the kid.

"No. Those were different boots."

"Different my ass. I bet they fit you perfect."

"Those aren't my boots." Grady headed down the trail. Hoke sighed, bouncing the foot from hand to hand. The kid and the big man turned down the trail.

Hoke followed.

The old man shrugged and urged his mules onward.

They camped again after dark. The kid gathered wood for the fire. Hoke managed the horses.

A pile of kindling sat in front of Grady, who hadn't spoken since the cart. He started the fire and fed it, keeping his head down when the big man walked up. He closed his eyes when he heard the rabbits hit the ground.

He forced himself to look at the rabbits. His chest felt tight and he spat. Wanted to yell. He grabbed each rabbit, twisted its head, snapped the neck. His back rounded and the breath fell out of him.

All through dinner his plate sat untouched. He went to bed early, and was asleep before the kid started humming.

Hoke ate the extra dinner.

Next morning Grady was up before everyone. He slapped the dust from his clothes and yanked the saddle onto his horse. He tucked his cameo brooch into the kid's possibles.

Thick clouds drooped down from the sky that morning, hiding the sun. As they rode, Hoke covered his face with his hat. His horse bumped into one of the others.

"Was that you, Grady? Sorry, I got my hat over my face again," he said. There was only silence.

"I know it riles you up."

Grady said nothing. Hoke's hat went back on his head.

They rode on until early evening, when Hoke nudged his horse to the side of the trail and called out. He needed to relieve himself. Grady and the big man stopped, but the kid didn't.

"Look who's got himself in a hurry now," said Hoke.

Grady rode toward the kid without a glance at Hoke.

He caught up to the kid and grabbed him.

"What are you—"

The kid fell loose-limbed out of his saddle. Grady didn't notice when Hoke joined him. He saw only the kid, dead and already cold, without a mark on him.

It took most of the evening for Grady and Hoke to bury him. They hadn't thought of anything to say afterward so they stood with their hats crushed in their hands. When the sun touched the horizon, the big man rode up to them.

He tucked his pigging string back into the britchin of his saddle, then swept his hand back toward the trail. A breeze kicked up a vicious spray of dust that made Grady and Hoke flinch away. The dust settled, and the big man was still there. "It's time to go," he said.

And they rode on. ♦

**NEUJORKER.COM**

Pat Landers on making small talk with friends of friends.

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## ROUND AND ROUND

*A debut novel mines the political, both personal and national*

BY JAMES FOLTA



ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN ALVIR

**T**HERE'S A MOMENT in *Hands on the Wheel* (Melville House), the shimmering debut novel by Jason Kiefer, when protagonist Harrison Lincoln remarks on the awakening of his intimate connection to the presidential campaign bus that he drives for a living:

The bus purred beneath him. His hands gripped the wheel, sweating slightly. CNN flashbulbs popped in the night around the bus and Harrison felt each one

throb in his eyes. The bus eased right around the snowy New Hampshire cul-de-sac, groping at the pavement through the melting ice. Inside the cavernous university, the candidates shuffled away their pre-debate jitters like huskies softly shaking snow from their fur. And as they took the stage, Harrison brought his bus to a stop. Carefully, tentatively, the bus and Harrison made love.

*Jason Kiefer offers a look under the hood of a bus driver's unorthodox affair.*

Hailed as a *Lolita* for the post-Citizens United world, Kiefer's novel explores the strange intersections of politics and lust. But in a world where the sexual proclivities of presidents and senators are plucked from the Oval Office and truck stop bathrooms and splashed onto the pages of the most prestigious newspapers, the novelist must dig deeper. *Hands on the Wheel* is a wonderful exploration of the unorthodox love between a man and a bus and sacrifices they must make. By the end of the novel, the astute reader wonders whether it is stranger than the world of modern primary politics.

Kiefer's book comes after much anticipation. The publishing world has long been delighted with the origin story of *Hands on the Wheel*: riding a bus into New York City, Kiefer was so inspired by his trip that he immediately sped out 400 pages in a fit of hyperproductivity. "A substantial majority of the pages proved unusable," Kiefer mused in an interview last year in this magazine, "but the idea of a bus as the vehicle for narrative, it stuck in my craw, as it were." The autopilot was set to novel.

Kiefer's main character, Harrison Lincoln, is carefully drawn. The most interesting revelations of his character come through his bus log entries. Beginning as simple recording of space and time, the logs soon become more romantic and personal as Harrison and the bus's sexual rela-



*"Haven't you heard? Inanity is the new sophistication."*

relationship blossoms. This log, from an early trip in Iowa, is so stark that it verges on found poetry but crackles with lust: "January 19th. 6:15 AM: left Marriott Motor Inn; 6:45 AM: arrive Applejack Diner. Gas and fluids refilled, the bus laps them up hungrily. Weather grey, roads slick."

Harrison is drawn to the one constant in his life, his campaign bus. A strong and stoic former Greyhound Bus, the vehicle seems to listen when Harrison speaks to it, late at night when the rest of the staff is asleep or somnambulant at work. And certainly anyone who has driven a large vehicle can understand the connection, the way the weight can sensuously resist a turn of the wheel, the way car and driver can together understand and navigate a road. These moments in the novel are so relatably put, that the astute readers will find themselves wondering how lustful is their relationship to cars.

Senator Tom Dash, whom Harrison works for, is a principled man loosely modeled on a Gary Hart or a Joe Biden. Having cut his teeth as a

young staffer with the transformative McGovern campaign of '72, the senator struggles with the discovery of Harrison's love. It is a fascinating investigation of the curdling of the sexual revolution of the Sixties in the older age of the baby boomers. Senator Dash recognizes that as



a younger man, his mind would have been more open to his bus driver's love, but as a presidential candidate and an older man, he must think pragmatically. Harrison and Dash's conversations are a tug of war between younger men's souls fighting against older men's minds.

Kiefer, keen to bring us close to Harrison's lust for the bus, lavishes his prose upon the details of engines, axles and grinding gears. The details are delightfully correct, giving the reader an unadulterated look into the filthy hands and stained undersides of vehicles of a puerile Springsteen-meets-middle-America car culture. In one memorable passage, careful descriptions of Harrison cleaning the bus' exhaust system mingle with overheard conversation between the senator and his staff as they pore over the details of a policy paper. Is building a functional tax system much different than building an engine? Kiefer certainly gives the astute reader much to chew on.

Educated at the exclusive Idaho Writing Retreat, Kiefer learned to craft sentences with the unambiguous zip that demonstrates their evident merit. His sentences snap but never crackle; they rush but never exceed the speed limit. His prose is its trimmest in dialogue, when the characters speak like people around us might, verging on the mundane. But Kiefer time and again proves adept at stepping carefully along what we might call the Baumbach line, making sure his sparsity implies depth while displaying banality. Take this exchange between Harrison and Dash:

The road opened out before them in straight lines, extending out across the Midwestern plains into unseen distances. Harrison stared so long that the horizon seemed to become just another of the roads.

"Straight roads out here, eh Harrison?"

"Yes sir. Straight and true."

"True as well, eh?" The senator's voice trailed up an octave.

"Sure. You could trust these roads. I mean look." Harrison took his hands off of the steering wheel, slowly raising them above his head. The bus, his bus, continued driving along the road, only ever wobbling slightly off of course.

"Well I'll be," remarked the senator, "I guess some things still are true."

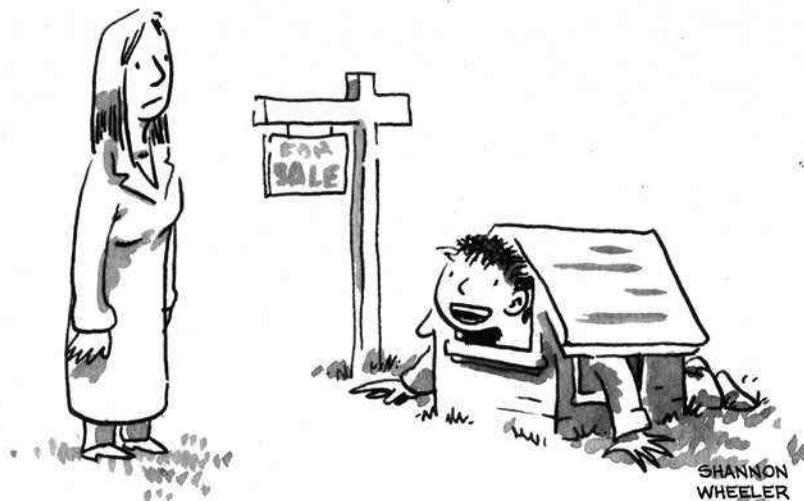
"Sir, you've been in politics too long." The senator surprised himself with a laugh at Harrison.

"Ah, Harrison, too true. I have been in the game too long. A statement as true as this road." He groped in his jacket for some piece of loose paper. It didn't much matter which, he needed something to occupy his hand.

Kiefer is to be particularly lauded for his rigorous process. Traveling on a generous grant from the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Innovative Bus Writing, the young author was able to visit an impressive number of Midwestern diners over a summer. And the research shines in his attention to the detailing of cutlery, plates and menus. The descriptions often run pages and pages at a time, doling out specifics in heaping portions: "coffee the color and taste of old steel beams," "pancakes teetering to Babel heights," and "short order eggs arrived so fast that they seemed to be cracked from their shells already over-easy." The culinary tour is as good as any other food writing and the sections are a joy to peruse.

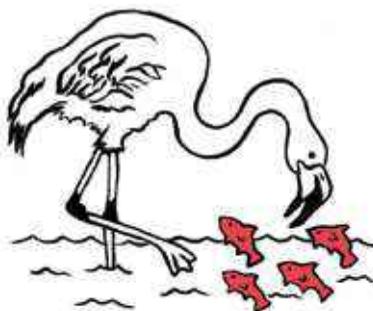
I felt the author's hand reaching for a crutch in the moments of Harrison's quiet reflection while walking alone musing on the bus he comes to love. The sections captivate and inspire, but have a tendency to lose steam. They are thrilling when he is mentally composing speeches he would give, admissions he would make, or sonnets to recite to his bus. But the sections tend to break down when Kiefer has to find his way back to the fact that Harrison is standing alone in an empty field, often ignoring the campaign staff searching for him. These transitions are as un-gainly as they are unnecessary. The one saving grace here might be at the book's apt ending, when a wandering Harrison and Kiefer's knowledge of Fort Green Park artfully situates a firecracker of a set piece.

Much hay has been made in the publishing world over Kiefer's reputation as a sad and dour young man. But this book is a brilliant sign post for fans who know him to be brutally funny. There is no doubt reading *Hands on the Wheel* that he is downright hilarious. This is clear in sections like when Harrison's mother excitedly attends one of the Senator's rallies, only to realize halfway through that she has confused the candidate with his opponent. As a mortified Harrison tries to smooth his mother's confusion, she loudly



*"The kitchen is fantastic."*

remarks, "well, Harry, what is a woman to do when a man is not the man who she thought him at first to be?" There is no doubt in the mind of the astute reader when he or she exhales the small sigh of recognizing humor that we are in the presence of an ace humorist.



The triumph of good fiction is to allow us to empathize, to open a curious door. Harrison and the bus are a relationship we find ourselves frowning on, but it is not our own frown, but society's. The astute reader struggles to find his or her own smile, to find common

ground on the book's own terms. Because what can any of us hope to find in any romantic relationship but a little sex and a little sympathy?

And as we watch our airwaves become increasingly thickened with politics, they become so weighed down that the rhetoric and trickery becomes normalized. The calculations, horse-trading and ad hominem attacks feel just part of our day, packaged and slick, part of a balanced breakfast. Any thinking American is advised to step on the bus with Senator Dash and Harrison, to prowl the political streets with them. Kiefer brings us inside the machine, reorienting the political process back to the strange place it should be. Kiefer's intimate portrayal shows us that the political process is as simultaneously strange and relatable as, well, a man having sex with a bus. ♦

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James Folta blogs about vlogs.

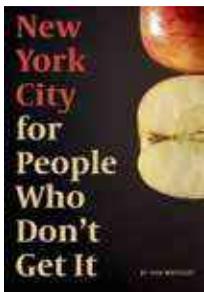
# BRIEFLY NOTED



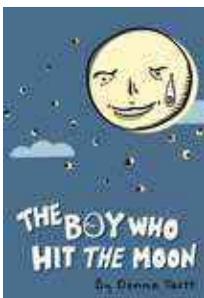
**The New York Times**, by *Various Authors (Self-published)*. A meandering plot that follows hundreds of characters, each in the critical moment of their saddest, least fascinating exploit. It takes major intellectual jumps to consume this book in its entirety, and even more time to do so. Moreover, and perhaps more damningly, it lacks the trappings of any actual book, including bearing a physical likeness to any book I've seen. It is impossible to read this book and keep the pages together in the correct order. It's triumph of course is leaving the reader with an overwhelming sense of doom. For now, one thing I can say for *The New York Times*: tonally, it is very consistent. *The New York Times* is better than you. *The New York Times* is right.



**A Tough Maze**, by *Wull Shootz (Ringlings, Barnums & Baileys)*. Start. Down. Right. Up. Second Right. Down. Right. Down. Right. Down. Left. Right. Up. Left. Up. Left. Right. Right. Down. Left. Left. Down. First Right. Down. Left. Down. Left. Up. Left. Down. Down. Left. Up. Up. Right. Left. Down. Up. Down. Left. Right. Up. Left. Up. Left. Right. Right. Down. Down. Left. Right. Up. Left. Up. Left. Right. Right. Down. Left. Left. Up. Left. Down. Left. Up. Left. Down. Right. Quick Up. Right. Up. Right. Down. Right. Down. Right. Up. Right. Up. Left. Up. (Spoiler Alert!) Right. Done!



**New York City for People Who Don't Get It**, by *Josh Whiteguy (BuzzFeed)*. Few writers have attempted to distill the essence of New York City into a novel, consumable by people who don't live here so that they might have something to aspire to. Reminiscent, of course, of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in its criticism of the upper class, which also brings to mind Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and Plath's *The Bell Jar*. This novel is undoubtedly like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, in that New York City also acts as, and bear with me on this, a character in the book. *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *The House of Mirth*, *American Psycho*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: these novels are all summoned to mind in comparison; but what a rare beast to read a novel about New York City.



**The Boy Who Hit the Moon**, by *Donna Tartt (Penguin Random House)*. Like many of the men who have traveled to the moon and beyond, this is the tale of a dreamer. A boy, our hero Tony, purchases all of the eggs in town. On a clear night, after his parents and sister have drifted to sleep, Tony carries his cartons onto the roof of his house and, with all of his might, he lobbs them towards the moon. He drifts to sleep, confident that the thumps he heard were eggs hitting the moon, and not hundreds of eggs piling up on his neighbor's roof. We are invited to enjoy the naïveté of a young boy, while sharing in the tragedy of the town waking to find that there are no omelets.

—Caroline Schaper

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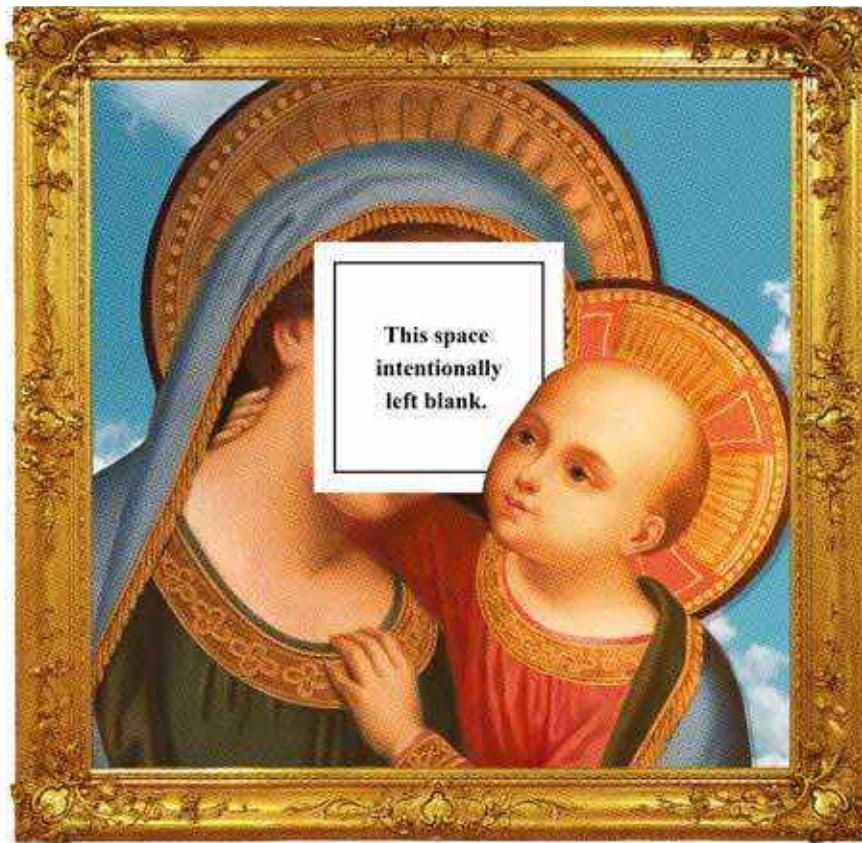
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# NEARING THE ASYMPTOTE

*One woman's superlative ugliness, and her son's destiny to paint it*

BY KATHLEEN JORDAN



*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

—Mary Oliver

OF COURSE, ANY well-read adult is completely sick of Mary Oliver’s work, but this one line from one poem is perfect and poses a question so essential to our being that it is as if the poem has existed since the dawn of human-

kind (Middle Pleistocene era by the most reputable accounts). Much to Zane Fergstein’s artistic chagrin, his mother’s answer to Oliver’s question is, “To get uglier and uglier with each passing year.”

I’m referring, of course, to Zane Fergstein’s “Nearing the Asymptote: One Mother, Fouler Still,” a series of mixed media paintings and sculp-

tures now on display at the Luhning Augustine Gallery. Since the opening of the exhibit last weekend, the Chelsea gallery been packed; the line of art critics and wealthy buyers encircles the block like one of Fergstein’s mother’s thick curling arm hairs.

The collection, more than thirty years in the making, tracks Fergstein’s attempt to document his mother Gert’s unfortunate appearance as he lives in her garage apartment in Terrytown, New Jersey. His motivation is at once magical and heartbreaking: he wishes to depict the true depths of her grotesqueness, and, by his own measure, falls short with each piece; luckily for his fans, Fergstein feels he may never capture Gert’s truest ugliness, and so he must trudge on. “Every time I complete a painting, I think ‘This! This is how ugly my mother is.’ But then I see her at breakfast, and perhaps the light catches her nose in a new ungodly angle, and I know then that my work is not complete,” the artist said, sighing around a canapé. “It’s quite depressing.”

His initial email to me pitching the opening and describing the collection was filled with so many horrific superlatives about his mother’s appearance—“the foulest looking woman alive,” “greasier than a plate of blue cheese french fries,” “a horrid human swamp,”—that reasonably, I had to question his credibility. But then I arrived. Indeed, the collec-

*Fergstein self-describes as a son tortured by the horrible presence of his mother.*



*“Can you keep a secret?”*

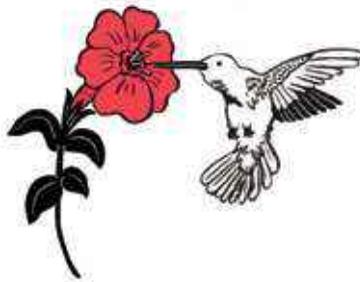
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tion’s visceral impact on the nervous system is significant—breathtaking.

Fergstein’s body of work covers the Luring Augustine’s walls and floors in a tactfully overwhelming composition: various large canvasses, a series of increasingly nauseating sketches of her neck, a three-foot by three-foot touchable polyurethane mole with real horse hairs protruding. Any one piece of art is enough to make it clear that Gert is the single ugliest person to walk the Earth—and yet our appetites are insatiable. At entrance to the gallery, flanked on both sides by grotesque profiles of the hag, is the work that was the germination of the entire series: an oil painting portrait of Gert. We see a thin-lipped lizard woman with hair greased to the skull and then, where it gathers in the back, instantly frizzing outward, as if it must escape from her head or else drown in the slick oil spill that is her scalp. Her eyes are beady and grey-brown, and her eyebrows are tattooed into what must have been a very disappointing shape—kind of

like a flaccid tilde, a symbol which is placed over the letter “n” in certain words in Spanish.

One piece generated a lot of attention at the opening night of the exhibit, and it sold to investment



banker Ali Massoud for \$520k within thirty minutes of doors opening. It’s a portrait of Gert crouching on the ground cleaning out her purse. As she holds her wretched body over the bag, the flesh around her hips pops out over her white corduroys. That hip flesh looks like a drained cyst, floppy and empty. More than

half of the purse’s contents is crumpled up Gray’s Papaya wrappers.

Upon first glance, the pieces in the collection possess hereditary but not genetic similarities—a wad of dead hair here mirrors a wad of dead hair there, but the elements, the building blocks, the architecture feel entirely unique—of, and representing, a new being in each work. I mentioned this observation to Fergstein over a tiny ham sandwich we shared in line for the bathroom, and his response was, “I hope each piece feels like it’s from a new artist and of a new subject because in essence, they are. Each day I wake up in a house with my mother, I feel anew with disgust and rage because my mother continues to find new ways to be the worst thing I’ve ever seen. I want each piece to fully take on the agony of that. Each day I shed a skin, and each day she puts on a new smellier one—like a cardigan pulled from a garbage dump outside of a Chinese restaurant.”

The collection is Fergstein’s first—though using a word like “first” might suggest that there is more to come. That, like so much in our small and inconsequential lives, is a false suggestion. Fergstein has made it very clear that this will be his only collection because he does not self-describe as an artist. He self-describes as a son tortured by the horrible presence of his mother in his life, and that horror must sublimate into art, lest it cause his organs to rot inside his body.

The collection was discovered by famed gallerist Maren Chapman, who came across the collection in Fergstein’s Terrytown barn while looking for a place to leave a puppy. Fergstein himself was happy to have the collection trucked away. “It really hurts her feelings,” he said, nibbling on an apricot crudité. “And she’s even uglier when she cries.” ♦

**NEUJORKER.COM**

Kathleen Jordan reads this article in a cockney accent—and by the end it’s full-on Australian.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

# KEEPING THE FAITH

*"The Slow Drown"*

BY MICHAEL YARSKY



ILLUSTRATION BY DARIEL FILOMENO

VERY LIBERALLY ADAPTED from Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantanamo Diary* by the gentleman who wrote the screenplays for *Forrest Gump* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *The Slow Drown* seems perfectly calibrated as a showcase for Nicolas Cage's more, ahem, "exuberant" talents as an actor, but strangely offers little

else. Cage plays a mentally traumatized, openly gay Sikh wrongly detained at Guantanamo Bay. The protagonist is never identified by name; all of the characters in the film only refer to him as "Son."

*Nicolas Cage goes all-in for another Oscar bid in the role of "Son."*

In a surreal and haunting opening scene, the word "Son" is repeatedly said by his torturers as he is laid flat on a tilted wooden board, arms extended outward and restrained while his feet are bound crossing at the ankle. He remains in this posture as he is methodically waterboarded by his interrogators. The Christ-like imagery in the film's opening scene, while perhaps a bit baffling considering the Son's own Sikhism, surely evokes some controversial yet wholly illuminating contours of thought: For example, is this the film's plea to recognize the commonalities between major religions? In these troubled times of our country where religious strife is being wrought to the most cynical of political ends, is this edgy and nuanced portrayal of a Christ-like Sikh meant to ameliorate the enmities in the name of common ground? Is it possible to believe that the captors of our protagonist would chant his name as opposed to remain quiet and focused during the torturing process? Or is it just that Cage kind of always has to do something Jesus-y in his movies? Regardless, Cage is surprisingly convincing as a waterboarded, mentally traumatized gay Sikh, giving a performance as a waterboarding victim reminiscent of Christopher Hitchens. (Ironically, Hitchens's actual waterboarding was wooden and unconvincing in comparison.)

Son is placed promptly there-

after in solitary confinement where it seems the drowning effect that waterboarding creates does impact his cognitive functions even further, triggering a trauma-induced hallucination as his decaying body languishes in a lank, filthy cell. The film is deftly directed by Christopher Nolan, who brings a much-needed dark and gritty undertone to the subject material. In the hallucination, Son reimagines himself as a prisoner in Dachau talking to a wise and surprisingly calm Viktor Frankl-like figure named Vic (played by the always welcome Alan Alda). Vic is an undoubtedly charming and charismatic presence despite the circumstances, and the cheery, precious dialogue could not be more Eric Roth-like in execution. Their friendship had begun to evolve into a clandestine love affair when Vic is brutally exterminated. In this hallucination, Son falls, in sheer grief with his arms spread-eagled and his legs crossed, into a random, really large pit. Shortly thereafter, Son re-awakens to the present day.

The sequence is staggering although alarmingly long: this flashback takes approximately 34 minutes out of the film's 128-minute running time. Cage does give a compelling portrayal of a hallucinating, emotionally broken, gay Sikh's self-portrayal of a Jewish WWII prisoner, but it seems the film delved into this territory only to demonstrate Cage's desire to do a Holocaust period drama under any circumstance whatsoever. Rather than reflect further on the ramifications of such a flashback, maybe by clarifying why Christ-like imagery is appropriate in a Jewish concentration camp or if this false "ancestral memory" has anything to do with Christopher Nolan's preoccupations with space-time, the film instead grants us the opportunity to watch Cage nail what, I could only guess, is what a Sikh-Jewish-gay accent sounds like. It's possibly the case that Cage was given such an impossibly specific accent that he

could not fail.

It is fair to say that Son's narrative does not end well: while he is released from solitary confinement, what follows is a surreal mixture of *The Passion of the Christ* and *Oz*. Son's many hours spent in solitary cause an inscrutable decay in cognitive capacity, thereby rendering him developmentally disabled in a character arc reminiscent of *Flowers for Algernon*. By the end of the film, Son is still awaiting freedom from prison, malnourished but still holding onto humanity. He finds solace in his writing and hopes to "write a diary, a Guantanamo Diary if you will, to tell my story." The



film becomes a passionate testimony for an artist's need to create and to live with hope. If the film does serve a purpose beyond giving Cage another opportunity to play a hysterically specific character without any precedent in film, the film should serve as a source of inspiration for the wounded, developmentally disabled, wrongfully imprisoned, gay Sikh memoirists all over the world.

To the film's credit, it offers a refreshing perspective on recent, "wrongfully accused" narratives like *Making A Murderer* by demonstrating a blatant truth: similar injustices have been committed and propagated on American soil for approximately fifteen years, and we remain apathetic to it because it is people of color who suffer those injustices. While this is a keen point, it is still the truth that, because Son is a person of

color, we are indeed less invested in his plight. Since Hollywood has brutally whitewashed Jesus and to a lesser extent Christianity itself, the film tries to similarly "whiteify" Son by portraying him, in tableau after tableau, as a Christ-like figure. And while Cage's performance is virtuosic in how he has sympathetically portrayed a highly intersectional character, many will be unsure as to how to go about gauging the authenticity of his portrayal. This may in part be because very few of us actually know any developmentally disabled, wrongfully imprisoned, hallucinating, Christ-like, gay Sikh memoirists. Furthermore, if we are unsure, would we certainly put forth any effort in discovering for sure? *The Slow Drown* is a framework by which Cage can do two things: (1) display his talent and breadth of range by competently mastering developmental disability, World War II, and playing across races, or (2) play a role where we would have no idea whether or not he is actually portraying the role well regardless. Cage is convincing if only because the audience is blackmailed into not having any other choice: it's simply wrong for its mostly white audiences to call him anything but inadequate—none of us would be so galling—and yet it feels so right to call him inadequate because, and forgive the tautological reasoning, he is Nicolas Cage. It is, from this angle, a truly Cagesque film. When Cage plays characters suffering innumerable layers of physical and emotional pain, we want to believe his talent for it has become so masterful, but yet when he tries to convey such a specific mix of human experience, his portrayal once again becomes unrelatable. Is it possible that Cage is too good for his own good? Or is he too bad for his own good?

The aforementioned questions are ones Cage himself seeks to answer. It is no secret to the film industry that Cage will fearlessly inhabit the circumstances of his characters regardless of personal

difficulty, from volunteering to be waterboarded in rehearsal for *The Slow Drown* to actually being waterboarded for the upcoming *Con Air 2*. However, it was a secret to the film industry that Cage himself would release a documentary that outlines all of the traumatic, Method-inspired endeavors he incurred in preparation for *The Slow Drown*. The dreadfully titled *Sikh And Ye Shall Find* is a story about Cage's attempt to preserve the Son character off-screen in his day-to-day life. The persecution and harassment borne by Cage are unbearable to watch: he is consistently mistaken for a Muslim by sheer bigots; he is consistently mistaken for a Sikh by friends and family who know it is an act but he's just Cage-y enough to pull it off; he suffers the outrageous bigotry on his Grindr profile as he attempts to discreetly hook up with men; he falls in love—or, rather does his character fall in love?—with a tolerant and “masc 4 masc” older gentleman who is unaware of Son's deepest secret: that he is, in fact, Nicolas Cage. It is stunning to watch Cage disappear into his craft and fully abide the terms governing his professional

and real life: how both lives blur, intersect, and how one can simply inform the other especially when one forces them to look as similar as humanly possible. One indeed wonders if Cage is wearing a “masc” for his lover, or if he is truly unleashing his inner “masc” through this character.

What does become compelling during these proceedings is the nature of the love story between “Sonny” (a reference to his “Son” character) and Richy: while it may serve as research for the dynamic relationship between “Son” and “Vic” in *The Slow Drown*—Richy is an older, bald, white male—one can't help but feel enchanted by Son's charm, borne from a seemingly Sikh-like compassion for all living things and a sense of spiritual unity among them. And yet this, too, is a performative aspect of Cage's self: is his compassion for his partner a performance, and if so, is this something we can surmise about the relationships in our own lives? Is our so-called unity with the world something we, too, claim about ourselves but utilize only as a means to achieve recognition elsewhere? As disorient-

ing and opportunistic as Cage's maneuvering might appear in this documentary as well as in everything he does, it certainly resonated more personally than the “not-likely-to-happen-to-me” events of *The Slow Drown*. Cage is a chameleonic...virtuso?...and his films, both fictional and not, can attest to that. But a film's ability to take an extraordinary person in an extraordinary situation and make an ordinary person identify with their extraordinary struggles...that is what makes film critics feel alive. I saw myself in Cage's virtuosity: his troubled search for recognition, authenticity, and perhaps his battle against loneliness, and I was flattered by the experience indeed. *Sikh And Ye Shall Find* is wonderful therapy for those who long to project themselves, or find a semblance of themselves, in the lives of the more successful among us, regardless of how we assess their talents. Truly a film critic's fodder. ♦

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Michael Yarsky on what he would (and wouldn't) do for a Klondike bar.

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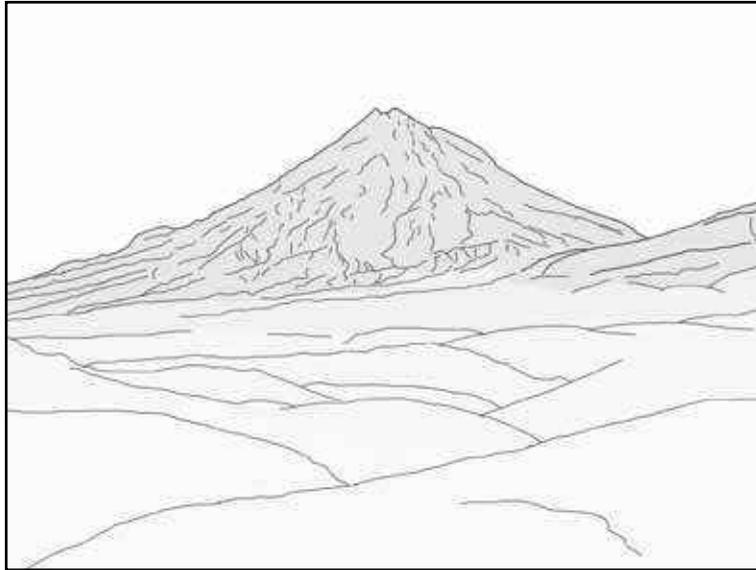
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, yes you, the reader, submit a caption, and we choose three finalists, and you, yes you, vote for your favorite. This is democracy in action. The cartoon caption contest is the closest thing to the Athenian ideal we modern citizens of the modern world have. Please exercise your power to vote. But only if you are a resident of one of the good countries: the United States, Canada (except Quebec, for the love of God), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland. And only if you are eighteen or above. And please refrain from highly gratuitous threats, anthrax, and pictures of your genitalia. We've had a shocking number of submissions like those just described, and in addition to being horrifying, they're making our jobs significantly less pleasant. So please, only light-hearted wit. Thank you. For a complete list of rules, visit [contest.neujorker.com/pleasestopthemadness.htm](http://contest.neujorker.com/pleasestopthemadness.htm)

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“Picasso’s Fifth”*

Allison Chains, Voluntown, CT

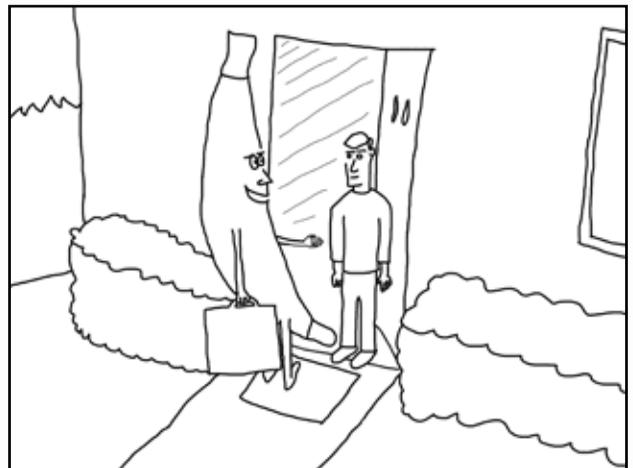
*“At this level of magnification, everything looks like a painting at the Whitney”*

Dunn Dundon, Bozrah, CT

*“Achoo!”*

Barn Scrunting, Brooklyn, CT

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I am always happy to see everyone, why do you ask?”*

Bill Toulaste, North Branford, CT



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