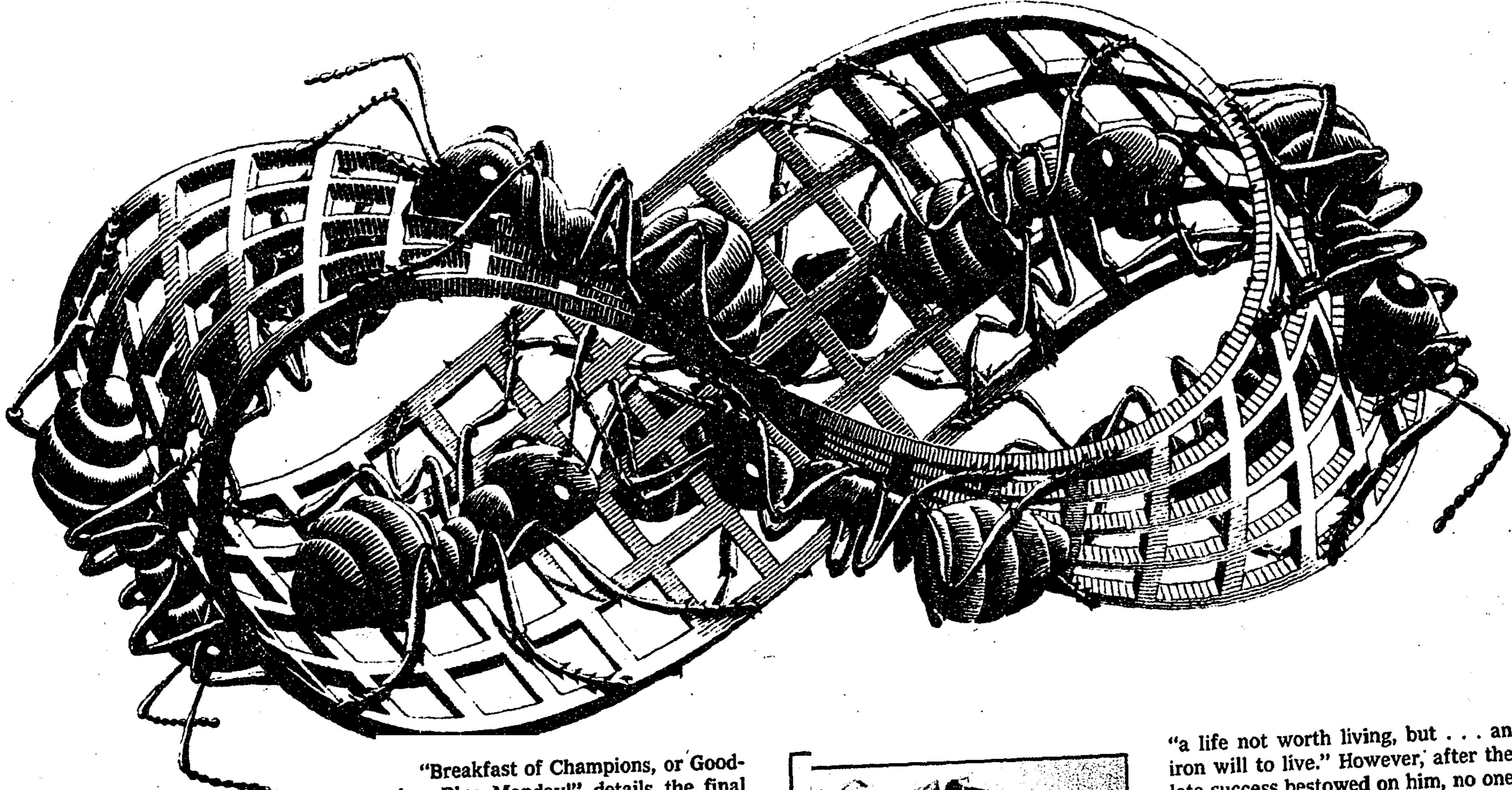


Vonnegut treating himself to a giant brainflush



Breakfast of Champions

Or Goodbye Blue Monday!
By Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

With Drawings by the Author.
295 pp. New York: Delacorte Press/
Seymour Lawrence. \$7.95.

Saint Sebastian has seemed more familiar of late. He sounds like an early Vonnegut character: surviving the arrows, he was later beaten to death by rods. His scenario rather resembles that of doomed Edgar Derby of "Slaughterhouse Five"; Derby lived through the fire bombing of Dresden and then was executed by the Germans for helping himself to a teapot from a ruined cellar. A Vonnegut person may have a hysterectomy at 25, or prove irresistible to muggers, be swindled by termite exterminators, share an ambulance with a homicidal maniac, find himself shaking hands with Nelson Rockefeller in a grocery store, lose all his wealth in lawsuits and end up on Skid Row, have an unnecessary amputation, or die from rabies resulting from kindness to a sick bat. But Vonnegut nearly always makes despair hilarious—and perhaps that's part of the cosmic agony too.

Nora Sayre is the author of "Sixties Going on Seventies."

"Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday!" details the final collapse of Dwayne Hoover, a rich Pontiac dealer who goes mad in late middle-age, some time after his wife has committed suicide by eating Drano. Crazed by a combination of "bad chemicals and bad ideas," Hoover sees 11 moons in the sky, shoots up his bathroom instead of himself, and finds that asphalt turns to rubber beneath his feet. This formerly benign man turns against his employees, his girlfriend and every random stranger. Finally, he reads a novel which makes him believe that everyone else on earth is a fully programmed robot, and that he alone has free will. He goes completely berserk in a cocktail bar and wounds a number of people who happen to be present, including his own son.

In this novel Vonnegut is treating himself to a giant brainflush, clearing his head by throwing out acquired ideas, and also liberating some of the characters from his previous books. Thus, he has celebrated his 50th birthday in the same spirit that made Tolstoy release his serfs and Thomas Jefferson free his slaves. Once again, we're back on the people-grid: major and minor personae from other novels resurface in this one, their lives ridiculously entangled, and future students may classify them as karass-hoppers.

I'm especially grateful for the reappearance of Kilgore Trout, author of "2BRO2B" (see "Hamlet") and other noxious works of science fiction, the favorite writer of Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, the philanthropist. (The latter, you may remember, was evoked by his own father as the man who "did to the

word love what the Russians did to the word democracy.") Trout was once described as looking "like a frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life." Wiping the fungi off his rotting tuxedo, or talking to his parakeet about the pollution which will surely kill both of them soon, or identifying with the Abominable Snowman, he reeks of failure to a degree that's almost triumphant: "You have nothing but desolation and desperation here, you say? I bring you more of the same!"

Like many Americans, Trout has

"a life not worth living, but . . . an iron will to live." However, after the late success bestowed on him, no one can ever tell whether Trout is kidding or not—he even crosses his fingers while doing so. Hence he shows a kinship to Bokonon, the guru of "Cat's Cradle," who insisted that all religions, including his own, were lies.

Trout is canny enough to suspect that he was invented by another human mind. He tells the parakeet that he may be "a character in a book by somebody who wants to write about somebody who suffers all the time." After Trout's novel, "Now It Can Be Told," causes Dwayne Hoover to run amok, Vonnegut strolls into his own script and introduces himself to Trout. Trout recoils: "Are you crazy?" But then, as the author lazily dematerializes into the void, he hears Trout crying out to be made young. It's a metaphor for total helplessness: the writer is just as casual with his creations' lives as any deity or random joker—he can make a plane crash or carelessly decide to let it land.

Throughout Vonnegut's books, our society sounds quite similar to the hospital in "Breakfast," where "persons were recovering or failing to recover from injuries of all kinds." However, as the protagonist of "Mother Night" observes, hating America "would be as silly as loving it." Meanwhile, there are a few comforts in the Vonnegut universe: sex, occasional travel to other planets, booze (even though it's really "yeast excrement"), the love of a good dog. (While it's acknowledged that everyone needs "uncritical love," that essence seems to be getting scarcer)

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of late.) But due to the ease with which Vonnegut can pitch his people into situations that are "complex, tragic and laughable," he is still our funniest pessimist, a magician of misery and farce.

Naturally, "Breakfast of Champions" is laced with lunacies: a motel bedroom smells of raspberries from the disinfectant and roach-killer which the management uses; a Mid-western Festival of the Arts is "postponed because of madness"; the author himself is almost savaged by a murderous Doberman pinscher he had tried (but failed) to cut from an earlier version of his own book. As usual, the deadpan derision is shot with sympathy. In this book, Vonnegut focuses on "collisions," on mind-poisoning, the dignity of advanced syphilitics ("erect, eyes straight ahead"—because the disease makes them rigid), the deflowered conscience, the "great sins [of] our nation," such as "criminal neglect"—on a world where 14-year-olds swallow paint-remover and pills intended to forestall contagious abortion in cattle (Bang's disease). The national mood echoes a Senator's speech in "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater": "We must become again a nation of swimmers, with the sinkers quietly disposing of themselves." Vonnegut also makes a bitter guess about the roots of racism, which he relates to the frustration of white Northerners after winning the Civil War: "they were cheated out of the most desirable spoils of that war, which were human slaves."

Well before the finish, Vonnegut has succeeded in his purpose of bringing "chaos to order." In "Breakfast," he states that writers have been guilty of making their readers believe that life is as orderly as the plot of a novel. Approaching 50, "I had become more and more enraged and mystified by the idiot decisions of my countrymen. And then I . . . understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably . . . : They were doing their best to behave like people invented in story books. . . . Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life," he decided to show them how to "adapt to chaos"—as the bewildered creatures in "Breakfast" are made to do. ■

An admiring review must contain two objections. First, it's disturbing that Vonnegut calls himself "Philboyd Studge" without paying any tribute to Saki. ("Filboid Studge, the Story of a Mouse That Helped," is one of Saki's most famous tales; it concerns the advertising of a new breakfast food.) Second, there's a distressing repetition of "doodley-squat"—a term so winsome that most of us would welcome a lifetime without it. Otherwise, this explosive meditation ranks with Vonnegut's best. We know that meditations aren't supposed to explode. But this one does. ■

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