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Above & Beyond

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Ice Skating at the Rink at Rockefeller Center

The “skating pond,” as it was known when it opened, on Christmas Day in 1936, has long since become a winter fixture of New York City.

December 18, 2020



Photograph by Peter Liepke for The New Yorker

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

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Comedian Caption Showdown

December 21, 2020

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



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

ANA FABREGA

“Wait. Can you explain it to me again? Do you know Jesus at all?”

MIKE BIRBIGLIA

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

MELISSA VILLASEÑOR

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

JOHN HODGMAN

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

SARAH COOPER

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

APARNA NANCHERLA

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

ZIWE FUMUDOH

“What does that even mean, ‘nice’?”

NICK OFFERMAN

“Now bring us the figgy Prozac.”

PETE HOLMES

“Do you accept Zelle?”

KATE BERLANT

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

RACHEL PEGRAM

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

TIM HEIDECKER

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

ALYSSA LIMPERIS

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

DEMI ADEJUYIGBE

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

KYLE MOONEY

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

MARIE FAUSTIN

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

KAREN CHEE

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

IFY NWADIWE

“I was six years old and got coal for Christmas\! Of course I have problems.”

GARY RICHARDSON

Berkshire County Postcard

- [The Great Barrington Declaration Ruffles Locals' Feathers](#)

[December 28, 2020 Issue](#)

The Great Barrington Declaration Ruffles Locals' Feathers

The Berkshires town, known for its cozy second homes and its convenient cannabis dispensaries, is distancing itself from a think tank's herd-immunity message.

By [Leo Mirani](#)

December 21, 2020

Steve Bannon wasn't angry, but he was very disappointed. "You know, I'm pretty low-key," he said one recent evening. "And I think my instinctive reaction was 'I really wish they had not done this to our town.' Because I love our town, and we didn't deserve it." He was sipping hot chocolate outside a busy café in Great Barrington. "And I must tell you, with *my* name," he added, "it seemed like a double whammy."



Bannon, who frequently receives "very nasty" e-mails meant for the right-wing political operative, is a pharmacist and the chair of the select board in

Great Barrington, a town of around seven thousand souls in the corner of the Berkshires where Massachusetts meets Connecticut and New York. A popular second-home spot for New York City residents, the town was until recently best known to city dwellers as the nearest place with a full-service pot dispensary. But that distinction was overshadowed in October, when more than three dozen epidemiologists, physicians, and statisticians, as well as a stray philosopher, published a report called the “Great Barrington Declaration.”

Sponsored by the American Institute for Economic Research, a libertarian think tank based in the town, the declaration argues against lockdowns and in favor of a strategy of herd immunity as a way to contain the coronavirus. Its chief signatories are professors at Stanford, Harvard, and Oxford, the last of whom asserted in May that *covid* was “on its way out” in the United Kingdom. The document immediately attracted international attention. Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical adviser, told a parliamentary committee that it was “scientifically weak, probably dangerously flawed, operationally impractical, and, I think personally, ethically a little difficult.” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Health Organization’s director-general, said that it was “scientifically and ethically problematic.” Anthony Fauci dismissed it as “ridiculous.” The White House embraced it.

For the people of Great Barrington, it was the declaration’s title that caused anguish. They saw it as a slur, in the way that Mike Pompeo’s insistence on calling SARS-CoV-2 the “Wuhan virus” vilified China. “The town of Great Barrington is 100% against herd immunity! Our town’s name has been hijacked!” a local posted on the town’s Facebook page. “The Declaration has absolutely nothing to do with GB. I wonder if it’s even legal to use GB’s name in a case like this,” another wrote, adding, “Why not issue something called the Great Barrington Nazi Party Declaration and put swastikas on it.” Mostly, residents were worried that tourists would stay away—or, worse, turn up without masks. Leigh Davis, a select-board member, drafted an angry letter to the A.I.E.R., protesting its “despoiling of our town’s good name.” The select board decided against publishing it, on the ground that it was too harsh.

Instead, town leaders fell back on a tried-and-true strategy: painting things. In May, they had tried to send a hopeful message by adding rainbow stripes

to a number of Main Street crosswalks. In July, a local youth group painted a colorful Black Lives Matter mural in a prominent alleyway. After the declaration was published, the town stencilled sidewalks with reminders to social-distance and wear masks. “We have been very proactive,” Bannon said.

The select board also tried to dissociate itself from the declaration. “We’re not a town that does a lot of national press releases,” Bannon said. But, for this, “we put out two international press releases.” The first, published in October, made the point that “the town itself had no role in, or forewarning of, the declaration bearing the town’s name.” A second was addressed to the A.I.E.R.: “Your co-opting of our town’s name . . . is exploitative and unwelcome.” Mark Pruhenski, the town manager, wrote a letter to the *Guardian*, lamenting that the A.I.E.R. “has caused immeasurable distress to many in our community and confused many others about our town’s safety.”

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

Books

- [The Mixed-Up Masters of Early Animation](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [How Leonora Carrington Feminized Surrealism](#)

The Mixed-Up Masters of Early Animation

Pioneering cartoonists were experimental, satiric, erotic, and artistically ambitious.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

December 21, 2020



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

There appeared to be a boundless reservoir of historical cartoon styles—with some, the Bugs Bunny cartoons, clearly made on a theatrical scale and with big budgets and full orchestras, and others, like the Bullwinkle cartoons, cheaply made but slyly imagined, rich in satiric push. It all came at the viewer in an indiscriminate collage. R. Crumb, the great underground cartoonist, had the imagery so stored up inside that, amid LSD trips in the sixties, everything came spilling out—what he called “a grotesque kaleidoscope, a tawdry carnival”—and gave him a cast of characters for the rest of his career. The flow of cartooning past so imprinted itself on us that nobody found it odd that the 1996 movie “Space Jam” paired peak Michael Jordan with characters who had first appeared long before he was born, or that the relatively unsuccessful “Bullwinkle” series, which concluded in 1964, could inspire four feature films three and four and even five decades later.

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

“Wild Minds” assembles its history with love and a sense of occasion. The chronicle that results, as Mitenbuler explains in a prefatory note, also appears at a moment when, for the first time in the history of the form, *everything* is available. Obscurities that in the past one would have waited years to find in a stray *MOMA* screening are now online. Even the lewd (though government-sponsored) “Private Snafu” cartoons, made for G.I.s during the Second World War and written by Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, can be found at a touch of the YouTube tab. The act of pulling everyone together in this way is new, and significant. The peculiar excellence of “The Right Stuff” was not that it showed astronauts to the world but that it showed the astronauts as worldly. Wolfe explained that they

were far from dim-witted test pilots: they knew what they were doing and what was being done to them. Mitenbuler's larger aim is similar: to show us that the best cartoonists were not haphazard artisans but self-aware artists, working against the constraints of commerce toward a knowing end of high comic, and sometimes serious, art. The book's governing idea lies in its heroes' collective intuition that animated films could be a vehicle for grownup expression—erotic, political, and even scientific—rather than the trailing diminutive form they mostly became. A cartoon tradition that could seem child-bound, sexless, and stereotyped was once vital, satiric, and experimental.

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

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

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

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

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

The Fleischers didn't see why animation needed to remain a diminutive form. Having made stake money with Ko-Ko, they took up what they thought was as obvious a subject for animation as, say, the adventures of Pocahontas or the working life of any number of dwarves: Einstein's special and general theories of relativity. Earning Einstein's approval, the silent film, released in 1923, is still an astonishingly early and sophisticated popularization of his theory. But lacking, perhaps, a mascot—Li'l Al the Light Beam or the like—it was a flop, according to Mitenbuler. Two years

later, undeterred, the Fleischers used the occasion of the Scopes trial to goose up a history of life on earth as imagined by Darwinian evolution. (It caused a riot at the American Museum of Natural History when it débuted, but seems to have made little money.)

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

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

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

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

The contrast between the practices of the Disney studios in Los Angeles and those of the Fleischers in Miami—long in debt to Paramount—is the material for an American comedy. At Disney, classes in drawing and composition were compulsory. Mitenbuler tells us that “Jean Charlot, a Mexican artist who had painted murals alongside Diego Rivera, a revolver strapped to his hip, provided lessons on composition and geometry,” while Rico Lebrun, an expert on animal anatomy, “dragged a deer carcass into the studio and, over the course of several sessions, peeled back layers of pink tissue until he finally struck bone.” *Bambi* was born. Boris Morkovin, a professor at U.S.C., taught the theory of humor, announcing, “Ve vill now explain vott iss a gak.” (In the manner of the Russian formalists, he had analyzed “over two hundred gags into thirty-one basic types,” Mitenbuler reports.)

While the Disney animators were dutifully studying life drawing, the Fleischers were living the life. Mitenbuler writes that the red light above Dave’s door sometimes meant that he was having sex with his secretary, and that when Max complained about this, right in front of visiting suits from Paramount, David told them that Max was having an affair with his own secretary. “The tryst soured Max’s already stormy relationship with his wife, Essie,” Mitenbuler adds, who “was occupied with her gambling habit. In order to reach her bookie at any hour, she had wired the palm trees of their estate with telephones.”

Soon the Paramount executives, no surprise, more or less foreclosed on the Fleischers and took ownership of all their intellectual property. Max Fleischer never recovered his studio or his momentum, or, for that matter, his relationship with his brother. It was easier to blame his mishandling of

his career on a business rival than on a character flaw. Throughout his long and mostly unhappy afterlife, this usually good-natured man would, at the mere mention of Disney's name, mutter, "That son of a bitch."

Despite wearing the red rose of the intrepid Fleischers, Mitenbuler is kind to Disney—kinder than a cultural historian of an earlier vintage might have been. It wasn't so long ago that "the Disney version" was the standard term for the worst kind of vulgarization of the classics. Disney is in better odor now, in part because of the proto-Spielbergian spell he seems to cast in his best work, like "Pinocchio," and in part because the lurid legends circulated after his death—that he was an anti-Semite who had himself frozen after death—turn out not to be true. Mitenbuler, while registering the relentless creep of formula into the work, gives Disney credit for genuine artistic innovation: "Fantasia," with its high-art hungerings and a score featuring Paul Dukas and Igor Stravinsky, wasn't the effort of a cynic. And, by eliminating sex, Disney landed, in an almost classic bit of Freudian-style sublimation, on evil, the forbidden energy that's essential to any fable. Disney's villainous characters—like the queen turned witch—tend to be more memorable than the doe-eyed good ones.

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

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

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

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

As a codicil to the Warner Bros. tale of independence rewarded, Mitenbuler relates the slightly later story of U.P.A., the left-leaning animation studio that brought a short-lived stylistic renaissance to cartooning in the fifties, with an unapologetically anti-naturalistic, clean and lean style, and cool jazz

background music. Some of the U.P.A. team, including the director John Hubley, who helped create Mr. Magoo, were blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, but the studio went on to produce a genuine full-length animated classic, “Mister Magoo’s Christmas Carol” (1962). It included a first-class song score by two Broadway A-listers, Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, which, once heard, is hard to forget.

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

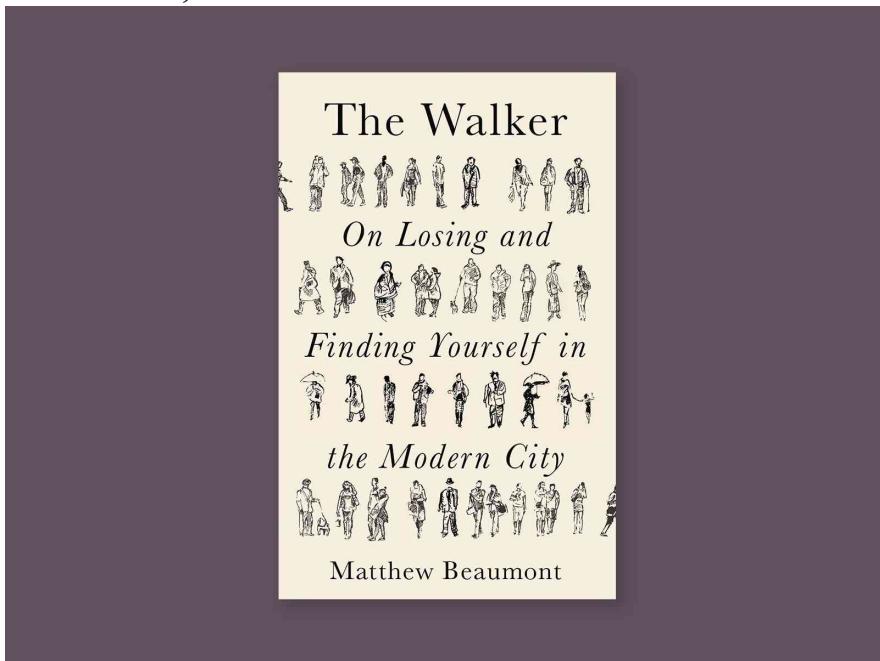
The larger story of the intersection of commerce and the popular arts, within which this history sits, is not a wholly negative one, but it does have a specific shape. High moments in popular art begin when no one has cracked the commercial code sufficiently to know what will work—will an Einstein cartoon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

The good stuff never disappears, but it does subside. We are living through a moment of subsidence now. Flexibility of form meets the certainties of commerce. Dammed up, the flow of creative energy retreats, re-forms, finds a new opening, and starts to flow again. The Fleischers were not wrong about this. All art aspires to the condition of music, a wise man said once, and perhaps all cultural history aspires to the condition of a cartoon: a seeming fluidity of movement, made up of countless small stops and starts. ♦

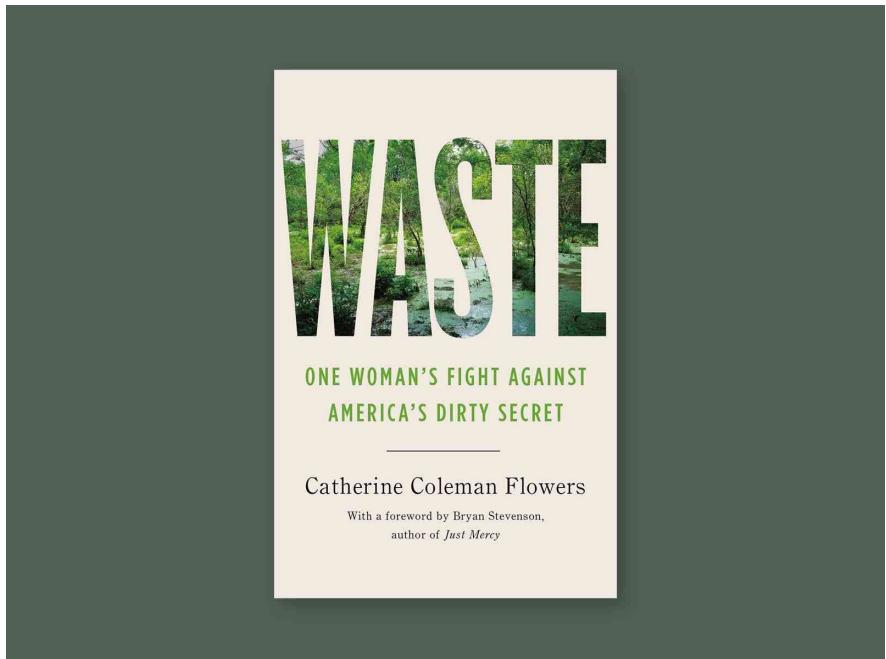
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Briefly Noted

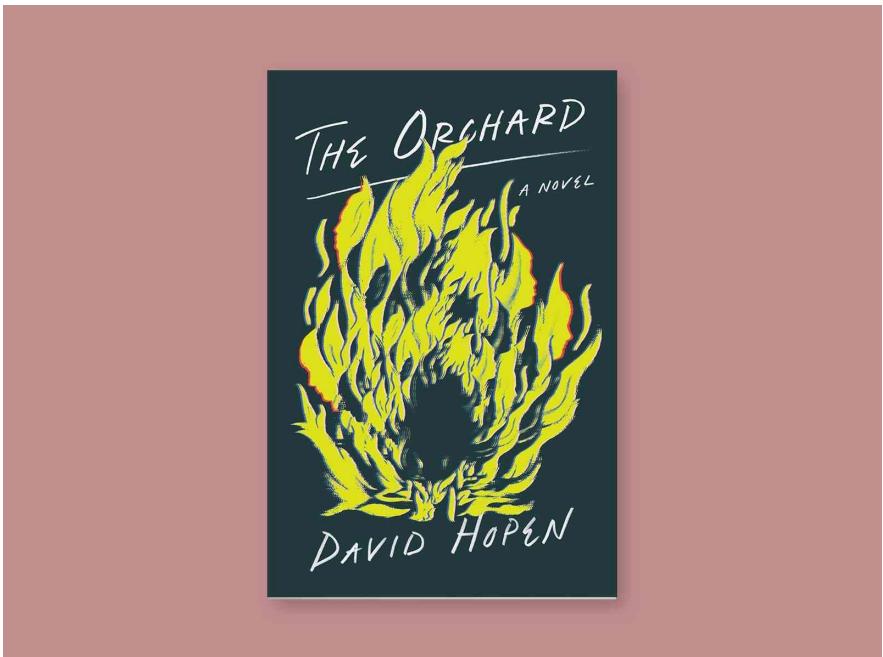
“The Walker,” “Waste,” “The Orchard,” and “Stillicide.”
December 21, 2020



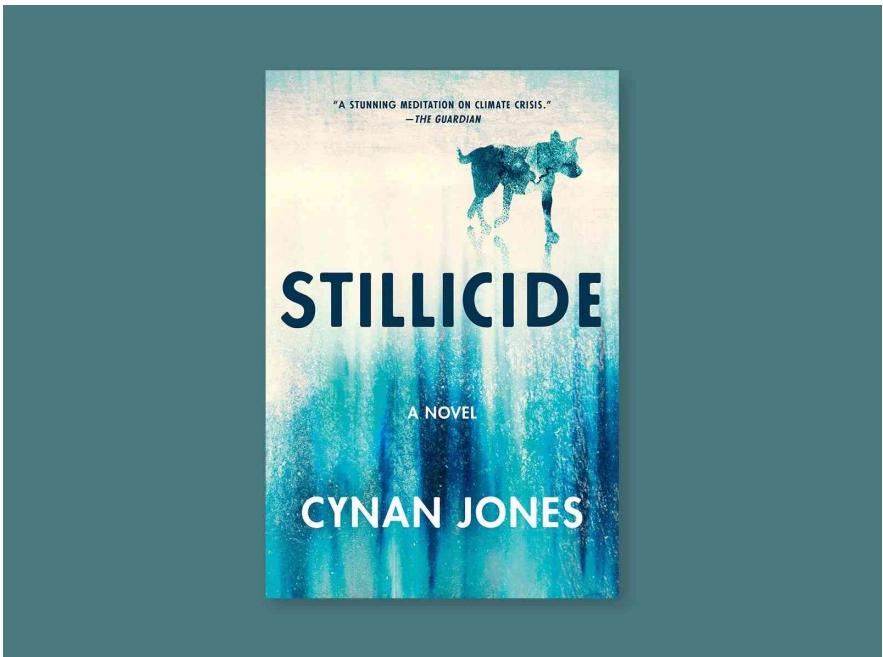
[The Walker](#), by *Matthew Beaumont* (*Verso*). Contending that our “increasingly authoritarian” cities, with their omnipresent surveillance and commodified spaces, make the archetype of the flâneur—a privileged stroller who observes without being threatened—“unsustainable,” this heady blend of history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



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



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



[Stillicide](#), by Cynan Jones (*Catapult*). One meaning of “stillicide” is a continual dripping of water, and the chapters of this novel collect like rainwater to tell the story of a dystopian Britain stricken by drought. Entrepreneurs propose razing homes to bring a giant iceberg into a London “Ice Dock,” a plan that sparks protests. Jones mostly focusses on the disempowered—a dying nurse who writes her husband a letter she’ll never send, a scientist who hopes his discovery will stop the Ice Dock, an elderly couple who refuse to leave their home despite rising sea levels. A laborer whose work on the Ice Dock will mean the destruction of his lover’s house muses, “How often the process of construction starts with destruction.”

How Leonora Carrington Feminized Surrealism

Each time the work of the British-Mexican artist and writer is reborn, it seems more prescient.

By [Merve Emre](#)

December 21, 2020



When asked to describe the circumstances of her birth, the [Surrealist](#) painter and writer Leonora Carrington liked to tell people that she had not been born; she had been made. One melancholy day, her mother, bloated by chocolate truffles, oyster purée, and cold pheasant, feeling fat and listless and undesirable, had lain on top of a machine. The machine was a marvellous contraption, designed to extract hundreds of gallons of semen from animals—pigs, cockerels, stallions, urchins, bats, ducks—and, one can imagine, bring its user to the most spectacular orgasm, turning her whole sad, sick being inside out and upside down. From this communion of human, animal, and machine, Leonora was conceived. When she emerged, on April 6, 1917, England shook.

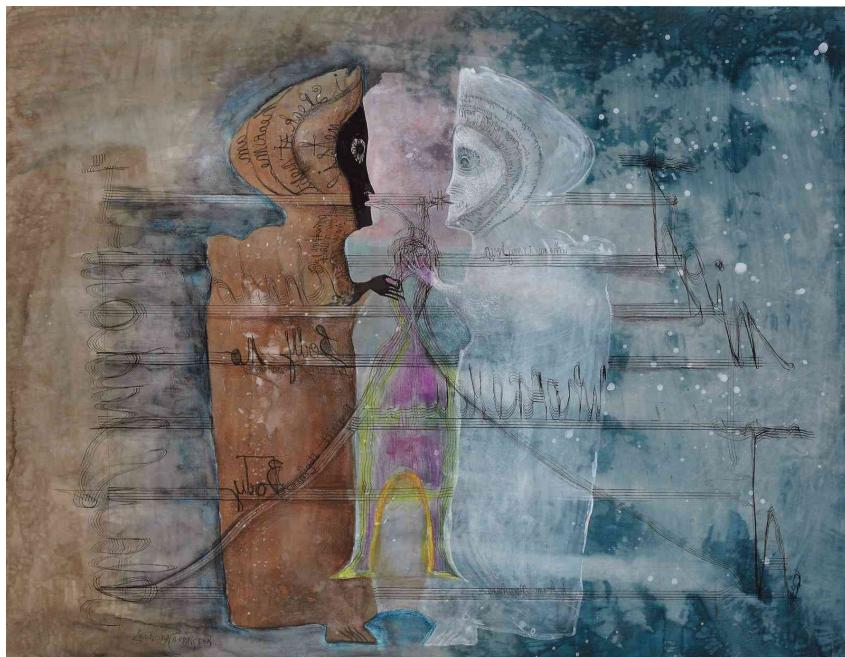
The success of a creation story hangs on how richly it seeds the life to come. Carrington's encompasses all the elements of her life and her art. There is her decadence and indelicate sense of fancy; her fascination with animals and with bodies, both otherworldly and profane. Above all, there is her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

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

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

machinery of capital, which takes the domination of women and nature as its origin point?

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



"Play Shadow." Surrealism, with its convulsive, outlandish juxtapositions, showed Carrington how to discern the folly of the humans she knew. Art work from © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

In Carrington's writing, the critic Janet Lyon has observed, the appearance of an ordinary human always feels like an aberration, a harbinger of death.

Ordinary humans, when confronted with Carrington's creatures, brandish their superior rationality and industry. Sometimes they press the point with guns, other times with atomic bombs, as in her novel "[The Hearing Trumpet](#)," to be reissued next month by New York Review Books. Yet they remain ignorant of how pitiable it is to be merely human in the first place. "To be one human creature is to be a legion of mannequins," a goddess in one of her stories proclaims. "When the creature steps into the mannequin he immediately believes it to be real and alive and as long as he believes this he is trapped inside the dead image, which moves in ever-increasing circles away from Great Nature." For Carrington, humanity was a seductive costume donned by dummies. To step out of the costume risked deranging the self that one unthinkingly inhabited, courting madness, the dissolution of the belief in the human world as the arbiter of reality. But it was also to draw closer to Great Nature, in the quest for a new, liberating art.

The story of Carrington's liberation from the human world is the subject of her memoir, "[Down Below](#)" (1944). The book opens by summoning its reader:

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

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

"Down Below" imagines its narrator and its readers journeying toward Knowledge as a collective entity, yet the circumstances leading up to its writing were singular and bizarre. They began with Carrington's adolescent

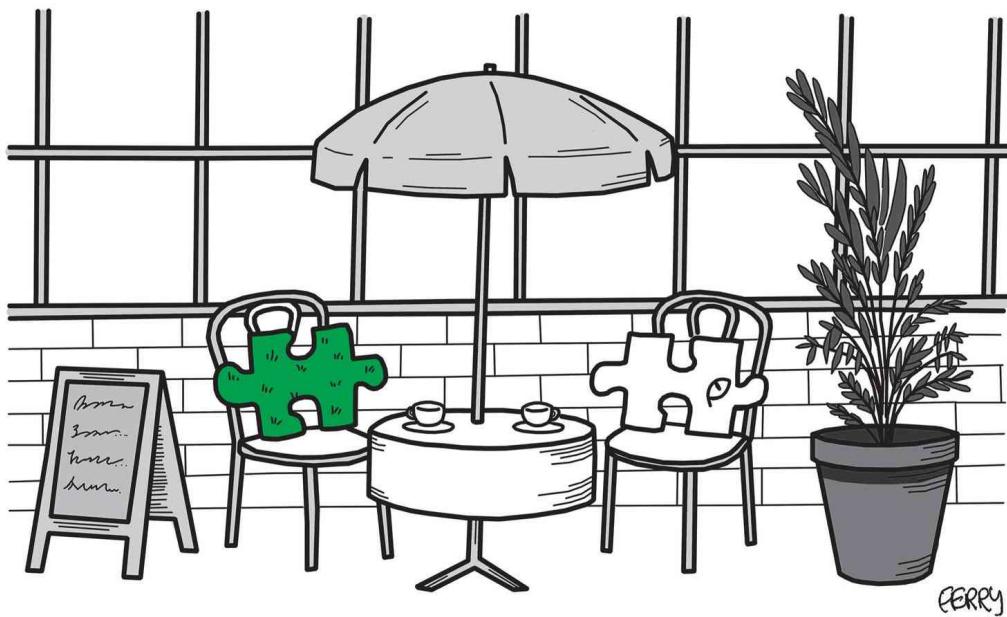
rebellions. Her father sent her to a convent school in 1930; the nuns sent her back. In 1936, her mother sent her to study art in London, where she fell in with the Surrealists. They worshipped her as a muse, a witch—not the old and ugly kind, André Breton explained, but an enchantress with “a smooth,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

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

Here Carrington completed her first major painting, “Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse),” in which a hyena with engorged teats and a woman with ferocious hair and a pale, unalarmed face stare out at the viewer. But amid the painting, the drinking, the talk and the sex, the wind blew foul and fair. For one thing, the Nazis were drawing near. For another, Ernst was married, more established, selfish, clingy, and demanding. One wonders if she started to see their relationship the way that his patron [Peggy Guggenheim](#) did: “Like Nell and her grandfather in ‘The Old Curiosity Shop.’ ” One also wonders if Carrington, eying the bas-relief, felt paralyzed by the way male Surrealists had treated women as artificial beings—their bodies manipulable, their spirits elusive. [Salvador Dali](#), in his essay “The New Colors of Spectral Sex Appeal” (1934), had prophesied that the sexual attractiveness of modern woman would derive from “the disarticulation and distortion of her anatomy.” “New and uncomfortable anatomical parts—artificial ones—will

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

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



"I wanted this to work, too, James, but it's time we accepted it—I am entirely grass, and you are clearly some part of the cat's face."
Cartoon by Tadhg Ferry

Like all quests, this one had its obstacles. The first turned out to be her body, prized and painted by the Surrealists. Previously dismantled into its erotic

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

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

This, at least, is what we are led to believe. The reader, like any dutiful sidekick, awaits further instructions to go Down Below. Instead, Carrington’s madness lifts, and upon her release she journeys from Madrid to Lisbon to New York. The quest is aborted, utopia abandoned, the threads of the story snapped before they can be knotted together. Why, the disappointed reader wonders, has the heroine failed to complete her quest? The epilogue to “Down Below” suggests that, in life, no one was there to help convert Carrington’s madness into a fully realized world. The artistic community of European Surrealism was now scattered, confined. Her surreal experience of psychiatric institutionalization was mirrored by Surrealism’s institutionalization in New York’s art market—a complicity

with wealth depressingly symbolized by Ernst's marriage to Peggy Guggenheim, in 1942. "Surrealism is no longer considered modern today," a character in "The Hearing Trumpet" laments. "Even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte's famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room."

"The Hearing Trumpet," one of the great comic novels of the twentieth century, reprises the quest narrative of "Down Below," but with some key changes to insure it succeeds. Its narrator, Marian Leatherby, is ninety-two years old, gummy, rheumatic, gray-bearded, and deaf. Her lifelong dream is to tour Lapland in a sleigh drawn by woolly dogs. Barring that, she would like to collect enough cat hair for her friend Carmella to knit her a sweater. But Marian's son, Galahad, less noble than his Arthurian namesake, installs her in a retirement home for women run by the Well of Light Brotherhood and "financed by a prominent American cereal company (Bouncing Breakfast Cereals Co.)." Before Marian is taken away, Carmella gives her a hearing trumpet, pictured in Carrington's illustrations as a ridiculously oversized, scallop-edged object, "encrusted with silver and mother o'pearl motifs and grandly curved like a buffalo's horn." Marian—part human, part animal, part machine—delights in the artifice of her body's enhancement. She can hear now, and how prettily!

What can we hear through "The Hearing Trumpet"? First, a thoroughgoing commitment to absurdity; the plot is gleeful nonsense. Then the driest strain of humor. Finally, the echoes of a ragtag history of English literature, mined not for its contact with human reality but for its capacity to conjure a world beyond the one humans can see, smell, touch, and taste. The hearing trumpet, or otacousticon, is a seventeenth-century invention, and the scrapes it gets Marian into seem plucked from the earliest picaresques. The retirement home is headed by a lewd doctor who preaches a doctrine of "Will over Matter." The women live in cottages, each more preposterously shaped than its neighbor: a lighthouse, a circus tent, a toadstool, a cuckoo clock. The discovery of a document detailing the occult activities of an old abbess suddenly launches us on a grail quest. It summons to Marian's side not Galahad but the winged animals and white goddesses of the Celtic and Old English traditions.

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

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

“It has been going on for years,” I said. “And it only occurred to relatively few to disobey and make what they call revolutions. If they won their revolutions, which they occasionally did, they made more governments, sometimes more cruel and stupid than the last.”

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



"*Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)*" (1938), Carrington's first major painting, completed while she was living in France with Ernst. Art work from © the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

The women have no use for frozen institutions. What they seek are living communities for all creatures, forged not through domination and cruelty but through care and mutual assistance.

The community that the novel creates is what distinguishes “The Hearing Trumpet” as a delicious triumph of world-making. Unlike Leonora in “Down Below,” Marian is not alone in her fight against Conformism. Her sidekicks are not her spectral readers but a gathering of elderly women, animals, and spirits, growing ever more crowded and boisterous as the novel shuffles them to their end. In its climax, Marian leaps into a cauldron of meat broth and, in an act of Eucharistic voodoo, drinks herself, lightly seasoned with salt and peppercorns. Dissolving like a bouillon cube, she finds her brothy spirit permeating the other women, who keep her from spilling all over the place. Together, they forage mushrooms, raise goats, conjure bees whose honey they lick from their bodies, and make spinning wheels. They hope to people the frozen earth with “cats, werewolves, bees, and goats”—an “improvement on humanity,” Marian declares.

For all the outlandishness of the novel’s action, there is something supremely practical about its tone, as if it were well within our power to step into its looking-glass world—a world where Carrington’s recombinant art and utopian imagination are not extraordinary at all but simple facts of life.

Perhaps what made the novel's surreal ending conceivable was the environment in which it was produced, the artistic community that formed around Carrington in Mexico City. She arrived there in 1942, and found a city full of socialists and communists in exile, its arts scene presided over by the suspicious luminaries of Mexican Muralism. (Frida Kahlo apparently called Carrington and her circle "those European bitches.") She married the Hungarian photographer Chiki Weisz, had two children, and created a new "Surreal Family," anchored by two friends, the photographer Kati Horna and the painter Remedios Varo. The family was a matriarchy, committed to dissolving the boundaries between the daily work of art and the daily work of care—a feminist project more enduring and surreal than any single romance or school of painting.

For the next several decades, the family experimented with traditional craftsmanship. Carrington's studio was "a combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel, and junk-store," her patron Edward James observed, impressed by the magic she could wring out of domesticity. Atop a table one might spy a cot for Horna's daughter, with a parade of long-necked animals that Carrington had painted around the base; in later years, a folding screen, a gift for Carrington's son Gabriel, with whom she would smoke the marijuana she grew on the roof. His forthcoming memoir of her, "[The Invisible Painting](#)," is a testament to a kind of Fabian workshop in exile, whose techniques seemed enchanted by care. His mother's "inner demons would dissolve" when she did embroidery and appliquéd; woodworking yielded "a she-wolf inlaid with abalone shells" and a roulette wheel she painted with horses. She made dolls stuffed with cat hair for the children and cooked for everyone—a procession of outrageous meals over which they would gather to speak a hybrid of Spanish, English, and French.

Underneath all this shimmering play runs a deep vein of vulnerability. "I am an old lady who has lived through a lot and *I have changed*," Carrington wrote to a friend in 1945. She was only twenty-eight. She did not have to be elderly to feel old—isolated, estranged from her body, her consciousness dispersed. She was soon to be a new mother in a foreign country, never to live in her homeland again. She had entered early retirement, settling into her self-fashioned assisted-living facility. After her younger son, Pablo, was born, in 1947, Carrington wrote to the art dealer Pierre Matisse explaining why she would not attend her solo show at his gallery in New York: "I

haven't been out of these four walls for about 2 years & have become so intimidated by the outside world that I might have grown a hare-lip, a long grey beard & three cauliflower ears, bow legs, a hump, gall stones & cross eyes."

Some might see this self-imposed lockdown as a constraint born from her insecurity, but it contained the conditions of her liberation. The gray beard would reappear on her heroine Marian, as would her mistrust of institutional consecration. Both are marks of wisdom, proof of Carrington's faith that the spirit of a community, where art is truly lived and made, can walk through walls.

Whether she was young or old, locked up or locked down, Carrington summoned unseen forces to come and make a lonely world feel bigger. "The Hearing Trumpet" prophesied the rest of her life, and she was content with it. She made her art, loved her friends and children deeply, had no interest in publicity, rarely offered explanations of her work, and never wrote another novel. And why would she? "The Hearing Trumpet" contained the utopia she imagined, and the world she knew. ♦

Comic Strip

- [The Cartoonist as Junior-High Student](#)

December 28, 2020 Issue

A Cartoonist's Life

By [Roz Chast](#)

December 21, 2020

Comment

- [First Ladies and Second Gentlemen](#)

December 28, 2020 Issue

First Ladies and Second Gentlemen

Dr. Jill Biden, Mr. Doug Emhoff, and barriers at the top that remain to be broken.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

December 20, 2020

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

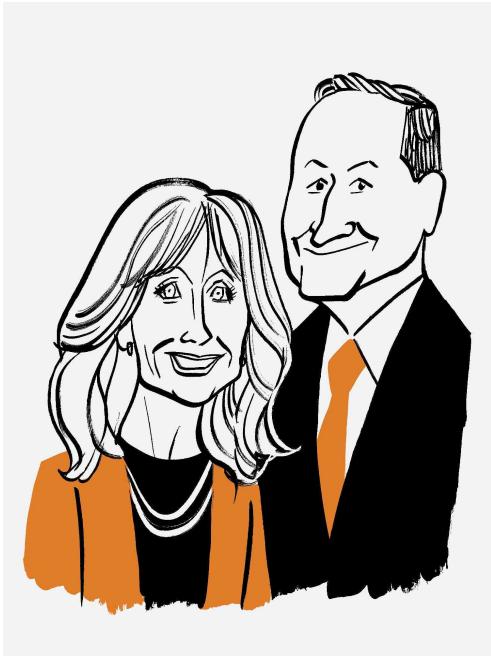


Illustration by João Fazenda

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

One explanation for the scorn directed at Jill Biden is that our political culture is so unhinged that anybody close to a President-elect gets pelted with whatever material is available, whether it makes sense or not. [Michelle Obama](#), after all, was attacked for wanting to plant a vegetable garden. During the Obama Administration, she and Jill teamed up to create Joining Forces, an initiative that offers support to military families—as bipartisan a project as one could imagine. The incoming Administration disabled its Web

site within hours of Trump’s Inauguration; Jill Biden plans to revive it. (Emhoff has said that he is considering working on food insecurity or access to the justice system.)

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

Nor is it incidental that both Epstein and Carlson suggested that the topic of Biden’s dissertation, which has what Epstein called an “unpromising title”—it’s “Student Retention at the Community College: Meeting Students’ Needs”—was piddling. If anything, that topic is more urgent than ever. Last month, a study by the National Student Clearinghouse found that community-college enrollment had fallen, in the course of the pandemic, by almost ten per cent; among underrepresented minorities, that number is close to thirty per cent. Community colleges provide a route to the middle class for people who are low income, the first in their family to attend college, immigrants, single parents, or all of the above. When Joe Biden was Vice-President, Jill Biden taught at Northern Virginia Community College, becoming the first known sitting Second Lady to hold a full-time paid job. She has written that it was easy for her Secret Service agents to blend in at the college, because the average age of the students was twenty-eight. Her plan is to teach as First Lady, too.

Emhoff will also be teaching, in his case a course on entertainment law at Georgetown University. (“Just call him professor Doug Emhoff,” a story in *People* began, though he will technically be a lecturer—a reminder that titles come more easily in some cases than in others.) He is leaving behind a partnership at the international law firm DLA Piper. Still, in terms of qualifications, he is not an outlier. Since 1993, every First and Second Spouse, with the exception of [Melania Trump](#), has had an advanced degree: a master’s (Tipper Gore, Laura Bush, Karen Pence), a J.D. (Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama), or a Ph.D. (Lynne Cheney). Emhoff was involved in

litigation surrounding the Taco Bell Chihuahua; Michelle Obama once protected the intellectual property of Barney the Dinosaur. The “traditional” picture has long been outdated; perhaps an advantage of being a gentleman, rather than a lady, is not being told to pretend otherwise.

Harris and Emhoff found each other relatively late in life, when both were in their forties. She had not been married before; he was divorced, and his two children call Harris “Momala.” (Stepparents are not new in First and Second Families; the list includes not only Jill Biden but Melania Trump, Nancy Reagan—and George Washington.) Emhoff has said that his role is not to be Harris’s adviser but to “support her.” His useful message is that supporting can be an act of strength, for a man as well as for a woman.

Emhoff has won praise and ardent fans for doing something that should not be extraordinary: expressing pride in his wife’s achievements. *O, The Oprah Magazine*, after reviewing Emhoff’s social-media posts—photographs of Harris next to an airport shop display that includes a book she wrote, of a TV screen on which an interview of her is playing, and of himself wearing a Harris campaign hoodie—declared him to be “the ultimate hype-man we all deserve in a partner.” That is as good a summation as any of the aspiration for ordinary decency—something that has often seemed out of reach in Trump’s Washington. Perhaps Emhoff’s radical task is to remind people that respect for a woman’s career and credentials can be something quite normal. He can always ask Dr. Jill Biden for advice. ♦

A previous version of this article inaccurately summarized the ways in which Kamala Harris’s ascendancy to the Vice-Presidency is historically novel.

Fiction

- “Acting Class”

December 28, 2020 Issue

Acting Class

By [Nick Drnaso](#)

December 21, 2020

This excerpt is drawn from “Acting Class,” by Nick Drnaso, out in 2022 from Drawn & Quarterly.

On Television

- [“Big Mouth” Is Still Changing—For the Better](#)

“Big Mouth” Is Still Changing—For the Better

In its fourth season, the Netflix cartoon doubles down on the idea that identity is something that cannot be neatly defined, and confronts criticisms of the show’s racial politics by turning them into plot points.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

December 21, 2020



An early episode of the fourth season of “Big Mouth,” now streaming on Netflix, opens with the show’s protagonists, Andrew Glouberman and Nick Birch, embarking on their first day of eighth grade. “Look at us, growing up,” Nick (voiced by Nick Kroll) says. “Not like Bart Simpson. That yellow schmuck has been in fourth grade for, like, thirty years.” A clever but heartfelt cartoon that is bursting with pop-cultural references and is popular with adult viewers, “Big Mouth” owes more than a little to “The Simpsons.” (Even the use of “schmuck” is evocative of Krusty the Clown.) Still, Nick’s comment identifies the uniqueness of this series, created by Kroll, Andrew Goldberg, Mark Levin, and Jennifer Flackett. By allowing its characters to age—and by focussing in on them, to an almost painful degree, as they do so—“Big Mouth” can feel more akin to live-action TV than it does to cartoons.

such as “South Park” and “Bob’s Burgers,” which have used animation to keep their protagonists static over the course of many seasons, as if preserved in amber.

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

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

The first three episodes of the fourth season, which take place at the camp, are some of the funniest TV I’ve watched in a while. There’s a new character named Milk (Emily Altman), a mouth-breathing whiner who can’t stop bringing up obscure factoids, seemingly apropos of nothing (“My dad’s friend Bob Reedy says there’s no such thing as choice, only destiny”). He is

a familiar prototype: the uppity dork who is so annoying that even the softer-hearted kids don't feel sorry for him. "Milk, your dick is so weird. I can see the veins in your balls," a bunkmate tells him. "During the Renaissance, scrota such as mine were considered a delicacy," Milk responds airily. Perhaps nothing embodies the "Big Mouth" formula better than this exchange: gross, hilarious, weird, precise.

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

In Season 2, a gay classmate, Matthew (Andrew Rannells), and a Latina one, Gina (Gina Rodriguez), got more airtime; in Season 3, a new student named Ali (Ali Wong) introduced herself as pansexual. "If you're bisexual, you like tacos and burritos," she said. "But I'm saying I like tacos and burritos, and I could be into a taco that was born a burrito, or a burrito that is transitioning into a taco." This flippant distinction, which seemingly suggested that bisexuals could not be attracted to transgender and nonbinary people, led to an outcry online. (Goldberg apologized on Twitter.) This summer, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, Jenny Slate, who is white and Jewish, announced that she would no longer voice Missy, a character with a Black father and a white, Jewish mother, because "Black characters on an animated show should be played by Black people." Slate had already recorded Missy's dialogue for Season 4, but she would be replaced by the Black comedian Ayo Edebiri, beginning with the penultimate episode.

Part of the charm as well as the significance of "Big Mouth," I had always felt, was its commitment to the confusion of categories, born of a sense that identity, sexual and otherwise, can be a messy thing that does not necessarily adhere to a clear orthodoxy. (In this regard, the show is similar to others I loved this year: crude, funny, yet searching comedies like FXX's "Dave" and Hulu's "PEN15," which explore race and sexuality in unexpected ways.)

As I watched Season 4, I was relieved to see “Big Mouth” double down on that idea. One of my favorite gags was Andrew’s obsession with Jessi’s new boyfriend, Michaelangelo. Andrew, who is straight, swoons over the dreamy Brit, but this is treated as unremarkable; it is just one more facet of Andrew’s horniness. A more serious arc deals with Natalie, a trans camper. Jessi is upset when Natalie starts bunking with the girls—not because Jessi is transphobic but because last summer Natalie, who had not yet transitioned and was still known as Gabe, from the boys’ cabin, teased Jessi mercilessly, calling her “fire crotch.”

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

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

Personal History

- [Some Notes on Funniness](#)

Some Notes on Funniness

Lessons in humor, from grade school to Johnny Carson.

By [Calvin Trillin](#)

December 21, 2020



Epiphany

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

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

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

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

or less what the Harlem Globetrotters are to basketball. I was voted third Most Likely to Succeed. Third Most Likely to Succeed—now, *that's* funny.

Casuals

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

For those of us whose attempts at humor are mostly written rather than verbal, the audience is an editor—an audience we, unlike the standup comic, have to please without the tools of timing or expression. In the first decades of my time at *The New Yorker*, the pieces that we were trying to sell—the sort of light pieces that would these days run under the rubric of Shouts & Murmurs or possibly Personal History—were referred to around the office as “casuals.” Some of the people submitting casuals were, like me, reporters who thought of casual-writing as a sideline. Some were fiction writers drawing a small salary that was ostensibly for writing Talk of the Town pieces. Some were people with no connection to the magazine who simply thought they had come up with something funny. Burton Bernstein, a colleague who published a biography of James Thurber, the nonpareil producer of casuals, wrote once that the casual, which sounds like something tossed off, is actually “one of the more difficult and painstaking forms of writing known to humankind.” Contemplating casual-writing over the past fifty years or so, I’m reminded of how I began a talk I once gave to people graduating from Columbia with master’s-of-fine-arts degrees. “When I tried to think of an appropriate subject for people going into the fields you’re going into,” I said, “the only thing I could come up with was ‘Rejection.’ ” It’s not that we didn’t sell some casuals. But what stands out in my memory is rejection.

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

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

“But of course,” Burt said cheerfully.

“In that case,” I said, “Count me in.”

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

In the mid-seventies, Tom, a lovely man, seemed to be struggling. His wife was not well. Writing casuals and free-lance pieces was a chancy occupation for a man with a family to support, and the project he’d spent years working

on otherwise, the book for a musical, had the marks of a nonpaying long shot. Then, in 1977, the musical actually made it to Broadway. It was “Annie.” It won Tom the first of what turned out to be three Tony Awards, and it seemed destined to run forever.

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

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

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

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

Here’s Johnny

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

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

was followed by a man who played the saw—the rare guest who was, if necessary, as expendable as a writer.

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

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

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

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

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

No more than three or four days later, Jim phoned to say, “Watch Tuesday.”

I couldn't believe it. I assumed that there were movie stars who'd waited months or even years for a booking on the "Tonight Show"—perhaps demeaning themselves in a variety of ways in attempting to hurry along the process. Harry Garrison had been booked after one phone call from Jim McCawley.

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

"Did you say 'trying'?" I said.

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

"Are you kidding?" Jim said. "He's sure to be on 'The Best of Carson.' "

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

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

Poems

- “Greetings, Friends!”

Greetings, Friends!

By [Ian Frazier](#)

December 21, 2020



Friends one and all! Let us unmute,
Excite the timbrel and the lute,
Make merry with our pots and pan

(The hour is seven, so we can),
Shout from the balcony or lawn
For joy at what will soon be gone,
And praises sing for what is here:
The end to this undreamt-of year!
Commune with us, dear friends, while we
Strew gifts abundant 'round the tree,
And help us pick out something nice
For New York's Dr. David Price,
The Bronx's Dr. Ernest Patti,
Every nurse in Cincinnati,
Dr. L. Woodward, of U. Miss.,
Dr. Pernell (she's our own Chris),
L.A.'s Dr. Anna Darby,
Arizona's Dr. Barbee,
Harold Varmus, the Nobel-er
(Doc of reputation stellar),
Ashley Bartholomew, R.N.
And when we check the list again
It unscrolls out across the floor,
With health-care stalwarts by the score—
By the millions! Heroes true!
(Forgive their student-loan debts—do!)
As we replay two-oh in slo-mo,
A Christmas cheer for Andrew Cuomo
Is not amiss, nor would it be
For bat virologist Zheng-Li Shi,
Steak Diane, the cool mask-maker,
Dolly Parton, Peter Baker,
Jennifer O'Malley Dillon,
Issa Rae, Calvin (Bud) Trillin,
Stacey Abrams, Mikie Sherrill,
Andrew Rea, and Colin Farrell.
The passing Comet Neowise,
Which, lacking hands, can't sanitize
Them, yearns to be the wise men's star
Instead, and shining from afar

Lays tender beams upon A. Blinken,
Dr. Fauci, and, we're thinkin',
Too, on David Miliband,
A'Lelia Bundles, Michael Land,
Gretchen Whitmer, fearless gov,
Jon Ossoff, whom we're so fond of,
Chris Krebs, and Tyler, the Creator;
Brightly and not one bit later,
It shines on Amy Westervelt,
Whose podcast, we have always felt,
Is great; on Alice Oswald, too;
And, similarly, on a few
Deserving folks like James McBride,
Fern Finkel (Brooklyn's courtroom pride),
Reid Singer, Mr. Brokaw (Tom),
Meg Knox, and wondrous Rosa Baum.
“Yay!” for Jack and Marta Handey,
And our ol’ pal Peter Canby!



A super surge of Christmas glee
To Joe and Jill from me and thee,
And all good things to Kamala

And Doug from us and Momma-la.
This year, just in case you've wondered,
Roger Angell turned a hundred!
Unequalled master of this rhyme
From back when it was in its prime,
He rocks! And so does Peggy Moorman,
Who is the best and that's for sure, man!
To those who lift us up: Godspeed!
We hope Josh Gad has all he'll need;
For Alexander Vindman
And bro Yevgeny, we've a plan
To wish them both benignity;
And with no loss of dignity
Shout season's blessings to Jack Black,
Mystery writer Steven Womack,
Jay Inslee, John Hickenlooper,
David Chichester, Chris Cooper
(With, by the by, a friendly "Hi!"
To V.P. Pence's pensive fly).
Should Christmas comfort be deployed,
May it descend on Terrence Floyd,
Philonise Floyd, and their relations
(Rev. Al, thanks for your oration);
May peace, whatever peace there be,
Enfold the family Arbery;
May justice come to all who thirst
And hunger for it through the worst.
Dear friends, if we could rhyme away
The year's vast losses, we might say
These stumbling lines were justified
As right in step with Christmastide.
Does meter link up hope and history?
The only rhyme word here is "mystery."
Let gladness rise, despite, despite;
"Love one another" routs the night,
And kindness is a folding chair
We carry with us everywhere.

In depth of winter, prospects brighten;
Mighty streams of light will lighten
The miles ahead, and goodness reign—
Once more, the angels' grand refrain!

Pop Music

- [How Morgan Wallen Became the Most Wanted Man in Country](#)

How Morgan Wallen Became the Most Wanted Man in Country

Wallen has become a singer, a character, and, to the surprise of many Nashville professionals, an online sex symbol.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

December 21, 2020



Nearly seven years ago, a shaggy singer with a shy smile introduced himself to America. “My name is Morgan Wallen, I’m twenty years old, I’m from Knoxville, Tennessee, and I’m currently a landscaper,” he said. He was standing on a stage in Los Angeles, competing for a spot on “The Voice,” one of those reality shows in which established stars offer aspiring ones a chance to discover, first hand, just how heartbreakingly the music industry can be. He was wearing a tie and a cardigan, with shoulder-length hair and most of a beard, and he explained that his promising baseball career had been ended, during his senior year in high school, by a debilitating injury to his ulnar collateral ligament. “I’m just a normal small-town kid, and I really don’t have a clue how to get into music—other than this,” he said.

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

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

Wallen was alarmed when the live-music industry shut down in March, but 2020 has turned out to be the best year of his career. A new single helped him maintain his radio ubiquity, and his homebound fans made him a TikTok favorite, reacting to snippets of songs and recording their own versions. Some non-country listeners first heard about Wallen in the beginning of October, when “Saturday Night Live” announced that he would be the musical guest on an upcoming episode. Many more of them heard about him a few days later, when the show announced that Wallen’s appearance had been cancelled because of video footage that was circulating, on TikTok (naturally), showing him at an Alabama bar the

previous weekend, sharing kisses—and, for all anyone knew, virions—with at least two different women. Wallen acknowledged his mistake in a downbeat but charming two-minute video, apologizing for what he called “short-sighted” behavior and signalling a temporary withdrawal from the spotlight. “It may be a second before you hear from me, for a while,” he said.

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

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

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



“Really, Mom? You wrapped up the clothes I left on the floor?”
Cartoon by Caitlin Cass

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

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

community that harbors, even now, mixed feelings about the cultural dominance of hip-hop.

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

In March, not long after the lockdown began, a woman named Priscilla Block appeared on TikTok, brandishing a glass of wine and singing an updated version of “Whiskey Glasses.” Instead of “I just wanna sip ’til the pain wears off,” Block sang, “I just wanna sip until the quarantine’s done.” Both her voice and her timing were impressive, and her cover was played millions of times. Block was twenty-four, and had been living in Nashville, performing in local bars for tip money. With the bars closed, she dedicated herself to TikTok, often posting multiple videos in a day: she wielded a makeup brush like a microphone, recorded sing-alongs from her car, and posted pleas for Wallen to release more music. (She wants it known that she was a fan even before his makeover, not that she objected to it. “The mullet just made it better, honey,” she says. “I love the mullet.”) Soon Block began

sharing snippets of her own work: first a couple of playful songs, “P.M.S.” and “Thick Thighs,” and then, this summer, “Just About Over You,” a well-crafted lament that propelled her out of the TikTok underground and into the country mainstream. She signed a major-label deal in September.

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

The album includes plenty of party songs—so many, in fact, that some of Wallen’s fans may worry about him. (In May, Wallen was arrested, but not prosecuted, for public intoxication and disorderly conduct after an incident at a Nashville bar owned by a local celebrity who turned out to be sympathetic: Kid Rock.) Wallen has said that he wants to change his habits for the sake of his son, who was born in July. And tucked near the end of the album’s first half is his version of “Cover Me Up,” by the celebrated singer-songwriter Jason Isbell. The lyrics tell the story of a man recuperating from a bender, or a lifetime of benders, surrendering to love and, maybe, sobriety; Isbell’s original is quavering and uncertain, as if he were still learning to believe what he sings. Wallen’s interpretation, which has been streamed nearly a hundred million times on Spotify, is brawnier and perhaps more suggestive. “Girl, leave your boots by the bed, we ain’t leavin’ this room,” he sings, in a voice that justifies the enthusiasm of both Shakira and a certain mother in South Carolina. Wallen’s record company hasn’t decided whether to make it a single and try to persuade radio stations to play it. Isbell’s songs are not typically heard on country radio—but these days just about anything Wallen sings sounds like a potential country hit. ♦

Portfolio

- [The Year in Funnies](#)

[December 28, 2020 Issue](#)

The Year in Funnies

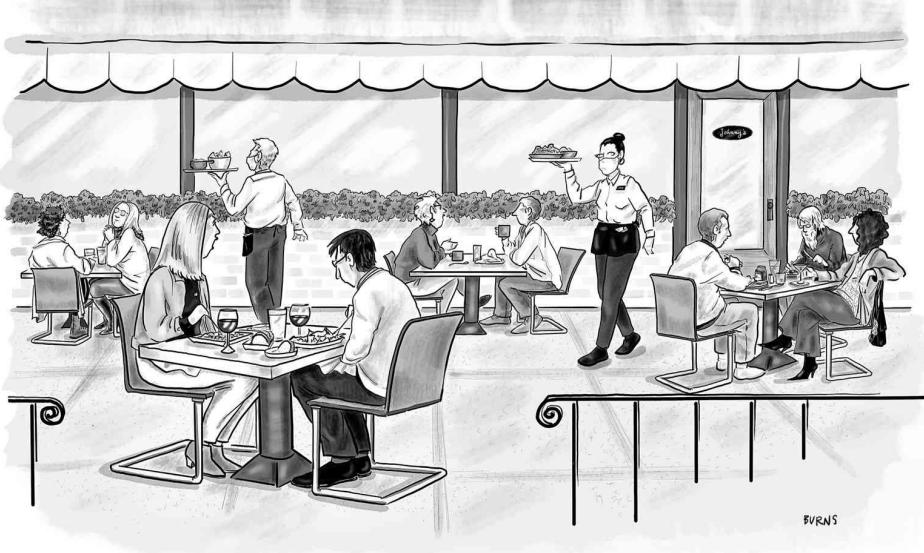
Some gags about how we lived in 2020, to one day help explain your toilet-paper-hoarding habits to your grandchildren.

By [The New Yorker](#)

December 21, 2020

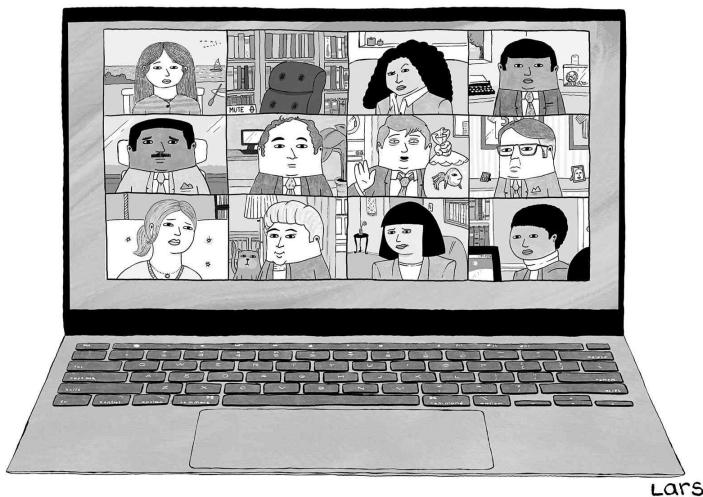


"Stand back—I am retrieving a cardigan from the 'thrice-weekly Zoom happy hours' era."
Cartoon by Zoe Si



"I miss when we could sit close enough to hear conversations more interesting than ours."
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Jerry Maguire Now



"Who's coming with me?"
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth



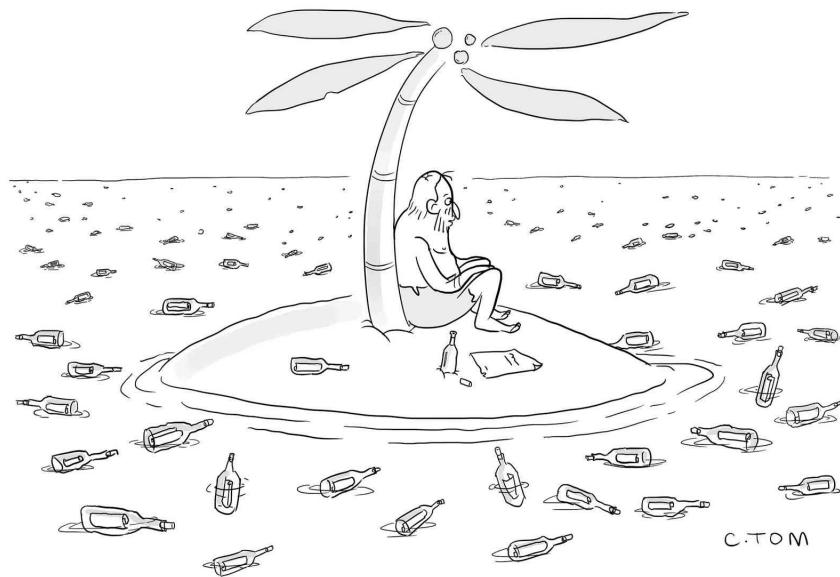
"I can't tell if she needs to stop goofing off or take a break from studying."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz



Cartoon by Carolita Johnson



"We've built so much good will with the neighbors. Let's not use it up with compulsive vacuuming."
Cartoon by William Haefeli



"Now everyone wants to talk."
Cartoon by Colin Tom



"Forget about what else is going on in the world. As soon as we put on this uniform, it's our job to remain creepy."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich



"What did I tell you about overfeeding the sourdough starter?"
Cartoon by Sofia Warren



"Since you miss parties so much, I thought you could chase your dinner tonight."

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

NEW SHADES 2020

Secret Sauce



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

Evening in
Nyack



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

My Fauci



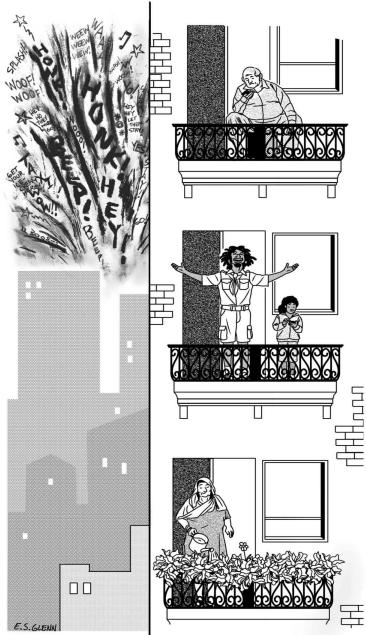
Apply before bed,
and we guarantee you
will meet each other
on the astral plane.

R. Chast

Cartoon by Roz Chast



Cartoon by Ngozi Ukazu



"Ahhh! The great outdoors!"
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Profiles

- [The Otherworldly Comedy of Julio Torres](#)

The Otherworldly Comedy of Julio Torres

The “Los Espookys” star and “S.N.L.” alum says that his favorite color is clear.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

December 21, 2020



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

This peculiar romance is not from a magical-realist novel or a quarantine fever dream. It’s an idea for a digital short that Julio Torres pitched again and again at “Saturday Night Live,” where he worked as a writer from 2016 to 2019. The piece never got made, because it presented practical problems.

The show would need to take over the Met for an evening. Also, a lot of “Saturday Night Live” sketches are tailored to the celebrity guest hosts, and, as Torres said recently, “one of the pivotal flaws in ‘The Chandelier’ is that there was no juicy human role.” Many of his rejected ideas dwelled in the surreal, closer to Ovid or Gabriel García Márquez than to “Dick in a Box.” In one, a man goes to Heaven and discovers that the angels act like birds, building nests and eating in terrifying, beaky thrusts. Another was an infomercial for a miniature staircase that people can put next to their ears at night, so that their dreams can come out and dance, to prevent headaches. Speaking about his unmade pieces, Torres told me, “I have mourned every loss.”

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

Torres, who is thirty-three, is more attuned to the visual world than most comedians. His imagination is a comic synesthesia, assigning anthropomorphic traits to colors, objects, and design flaws. Another digital short was inspired by a visit to a bland, newly renovated apartment on the Upper East Side. When he used the bathroom, he was appalled by the ornate green glass sink. “My world was rocked,” he said. “I took, like, thirty pictures of it.” At “S.N.L.,” he wrote an internal monologue for the sink (“Am I too much? Oh, my God. I’m simply too much”) and had the crew

return to the apartment to film it. That week's host, Emily Blunt, did the trembly voice-over. "She can play damaged very well," Torres said.

Last year, Torres left "S.N.L." to focus on "Los Espookys," the outré HBO sitcom that he created with the comedian Ana Fabrega and Fred Armisen, a former "S.N.L." cast member. Torres plays the heir to a chocolate fortune, who goes into business with his friends producing custom horror and gore effects. (In the pilot, a priest hires the gang to stage an exorcism so that he can show up a younger rival priest.) The series, which is bilingual, premiered in 2019; the second season is in pandemic limbo. Armisen told me that, before he started working with Torres, he would call his friends at "S.N.L." to ask who was behind certain sketches. "Most of the time, it turned out to be Julio," he said.

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

Standup comedy favors minimalism: a bare stage, a microphone, and outfits that range from casual to barely out of bed. Its optical elements are usually limited to wacky props (Carrot Top), rubber faces (Leslie Jones), or, when the budget allows, arena-rock effects (Kevin Hart). But Torres approaches comedy like an inspiration board. Describing an idea for a future special

about fables, he told me, “The set is a garden, and there’s a pond. Maybe there are clouds painted, and then I walk about the garden and talk about the fables.” He had not written any of the fables. One of his few stylistic antecedents is Pee-wee Herman, the antic character played by Paul Reubens, who inhabited a candy-colored playhouse. Pee-wee’s hyperactivity matched his visual maximalism, though; Torres has a deadpan stillness at odds with his twink-from-space look. On the “*Tonight Show*,” he has appeared, unsmiling, to give Jimmy Fallon suggestions for Halloween costumes (“the lost city of Atlantis”) and Christmas gifts (“a music box that can only be locked from the inside, by the ballerina”).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

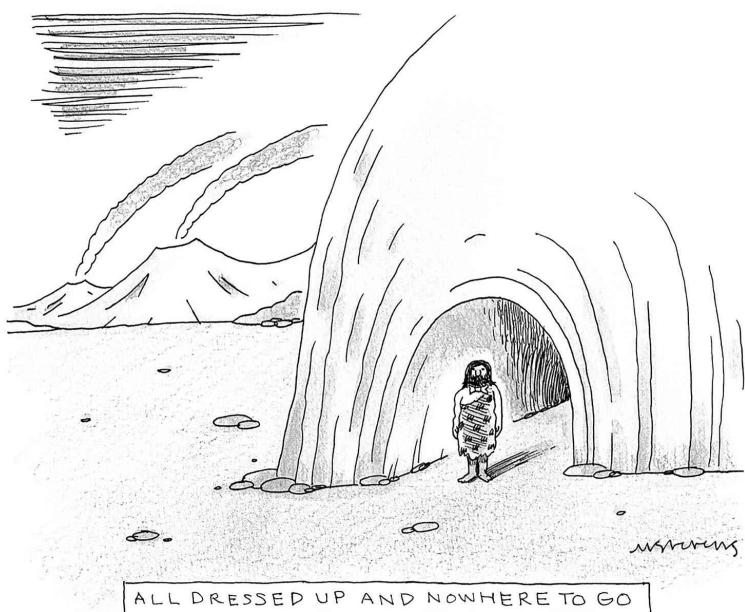
On the second floor, he gravitated toward a roll of neon-orange neoprene. “Could be some fun shorts,” he said, and asked an employee to cut him a strip. We walked through the spandex aisle, where he took a swath of purple mesh. “I have tried to make swimwear,” he said. “Micromanaging the fit of a Speedo long distance is very difficult.” But difficulty seemed to be the point: why buy a pair of shorts when you can make your own across hemispheres? “It’s something that comes up in therapy a lot—not always having to pick the harder way,” Torres said. In a few days, he was leaving for Chile, which had erupted in civil unrest, to begin filming the second season of “Los Espookys.” The whole series felt like an act of ostentatious difficulty: a bilingual show with a convoluted premise, shot in a country in the throes of a revolution. “It’s a miracle that it was made,” he said.

“My Favorite Shapes” was also a Pan-American project. Torres enlisted his mother and his younger sister, Marta, who lives in San Salvador as well, to create the look of the show, down to his two-toned blue chair and translucent shoes. (They were credited with “Architecture and Overall Visual Concept,” a designation that stumped the Emmy committee.) “He said that we were the only ones who would understand what he wanted to do,” Tita told me, in Spanish. The family shares an aesthetic language, influenced by the Memphis design movement of the eighties, which favors bold colors and cutout shapes; Tita and Marta collaborate on a line of handbags that resemble seashells or open eyes. For “My Favorite Shapes,” they made digital renderings of the set, which Torres reviewed in New York. Marta recalled, “Every time we would send him something, he was, like, ‘More shapes! More levels!’ ”

At the fabric store, Torres placed his finds at the cash register and kept browsing. He refuses to use credit cards (“I just don’t like games”) and, for a time, shut down his bank account. “At that point, I had, like, forty dollars,” he said. He surveyed the brocade aisle. The store was closing soon, and he was getting impatient. “There’s something that we’re just not finding,” he said. “I’m vibing with flowers a lot, but I hate florals.” Finally, he spied a brocade with a blue-and-green watercolor pattern. He pulled the bolt from the shelf and felt the cloth between his fingers. “A floral that’s not a floral!” he said. “It does exist.”

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

Torres was born during the last years of the Salvadoran Civil War, and he has dim memories of hiding under the dining table with his mother as helicopters noisily hovered. But, by his account, his childhood in San Salvador was idyllic. The family lived in a stylish apartment above his mother's clothing store. (His father, also named Julio, is a civil engineer.) Tita sewed his and his sister's clothes; she told me that her children were "*mis muñecas*"—"my dolls." Torres had few friends, immersing himself in his toys. When his father brought home miniature cars, he created elaborate traffic jams, mimicking the cacophonous streets of San Salvador, and sold the drivers imaginary lottery tickets. "I was just in my own little world," he said.



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

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

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

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

He knew that he was gay, but considered his sexuality a "frivolity" that he would address only when he absolutely had to, like going to the dentist. "It felt like one of a myriad of things that made me an other," he said. He was more preoccupied with his atheism. As a child, he had been told the truth about Santa Claus—a "politically difficult year to navigate," since some kids were still believers—and expected a similar revelation about God to follow, but it never did. After high school, unable to afford tuition at an American college, he enrolled in a two-year advertising program in El Salvador, at a "scam of a nothing school" that he despised. He finished the program, and,

while working at an ad agency, he gathered his relatives and gave a detailed presentation on why they should pay for him to go to school in New York. His second time applying to the New School, he got a significant scholarship, and in 2009 he moved to Manhattan, with enough money to live there for two years. “They wanted a translation of my transcripts, because they were in Spanish, so I translated them myself and I embellished a bunch of courses,” he said. “And then I sheepishly put it in front of the admissions officer, and she was, like, ‘Oh, my God, why didn’t you say you took all these courses when you applied?’ And she takes out her calculator and says, ‘You’re a junior, not a freshman.’ And I’m, like, ‘Ooh, I guess I am.’ ”

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

Finally, he found a job as an art archivist for the estate of the late painter John Heliker. He worked in a windowless vault in Newark, cataloguing Heliker’s papers. “I glamorized the optics of that job,” he said. “Solitude has never really been a problem for me. I liked how weird and difficult it was.” He had a side gig at the Neue Galerie, on the Upper East Side. Working at the coat check one day, he recalled, “I overheard this elderly rich woman tell this other elderly rich woman, ‘Oh, remind me to send you that article on how good standing is for you.’ That was the moment where I realized that *New Yorker* cartoons were based on a reality.” He wrote in his notebook, “Standup comedy?” That night, he Googled “standup comedy open mics NYC” and found one in the East Village, where he told the coat-check story in his comedy début.

By then, he was living in an apartment in Bushwick with Einbinder and another friend. Einbinder, whose mother, Laraine Newman, was an original cast member on “Saturday Night Live,” encouraged Torres’s comedy career. They started making funny videos, including one in which Einbinder plays a

mermaid intern navigating the microaggressions of office life. (Her co-workers assume she knows everyone in the ocean.) They performed live sketches at bars and comedy clubs. “In one, we were bitchy little angels texting on a cloud, just talking about how bored we were, and about a party and who’s going to be there from Heaven,” Einbinder recalled. “And then we started spreading cream cheese all over ourselves.”

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

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

In February, “Los Espookys” returned to Santiago to begin production on Season 2. Because of the nationwide uprisings, producers had looked into shooting elsewhere, but Mexico’s film crews were overbooked, Colombia was having its own protests, and other Latin-American countries lacked the infrastructure to host an HBO sitcom. By March, news of the coronavirus was picking up, but there were only a few cases in South America. One day, a cast member who had just come from the United States found out that he’d been in contact with someone who’d tested positive. Shooting was paused. Everyone worried—the actor’s makeup artist was an older woman, and she had touched his face. The actor tested negative, but “that fear was enough

for us to say, ‘You know what? It’s just not worth it,’ ” Torres told me. Production was halted, with a third of the season unfinished.

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

When the Black Lives Matter protests began, he went out to march in two masks and a pair of goggles. Several weeks later, he was still processing his place in his adopted country, and within the larger capitalistic forces that shape the entertainment business. “I’ve seen so many corporations—HBO included—talk about how now it’s time to ‘elevate Black voices,’ and that got me thinking about the Hollywood fairy tale that representation equals change,” he said. “For a while, I have felt like a pawn in this hollow representation game. Because what the hell does Disney’s ‘Coco’ do for Mexican children? Bob Iger gets richer. That’s the climax. And then I’m researching the C.E.O.s of these media conglomerates, and they’re predictably the mushiest white faces you can think of. You see who is reaping the benefits of all the ‘woke’ content that me and my peers produce, and it’s just these kings. These monarchs.” He let out a cynical laugh. “I don’t know what the answer is.”

Torres was hired at “Saturday Night Live” in 2016, as the show was feeling pressure to diversify. He had applied for a writing job and been rejected, but then was asked to audition as a cast member. “Instead of showing a wide array of characters that I could play, I just stood there and did my standup, with glitter on my face,” he recalled. He was brought on initially as a guest writer. Torres managed to float above the show’s nerve-racking backstage culture. “It’s the tradition to wear a suit on Saturdays,” Jeremy Beiler told me. “On Julio’s first Saturday show, he showed up in a sparkly silver jacket. I was just, like, ‘Oh, that’s another way to do it.’ ”

Torres, along with Beiler and Bowen Yang, who was a writer on “S.N.L.” before becoming its first Chinese-American cast member, helped bring a stealth gay aesthetic to the show. When John Mulaney hosted, Yang and Torres wrote a sketch for him about a social-media intern at Nestlé who gets chastised for accidentally posting hookup messages (“Wreck me, daddy”) on the corporate Instagram account. The sketch got cut after dress rehearsal, but, last fall, after Torres had left “S.N.L.,” it was revived for Harry Styles. Before the broadcast, the network’s lawyers asked them not to use Nestlé, an advertiser, so Yang and Torres had to brainstorm. “That was two to three hours of us just texting each other back and forth, putting photos of grilled-cheese sandwiches with these raunchy captions, doing experimental trial-and-error work,” Yang said. They landed on Sara Lee, and the sketch went viral. “I feel like Julio getting hired and getting his stuff on was this huge quantum leap for the show,” Yang told me. “He brought both his queerness and his hyper-specific point of view, and then he glued those two things together.”

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

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

regret,” Torres said, then tilted his own camera toward his hands and acted the scene with quivering fingers.

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

“That is so right on,” Armisen said.

When I spoke to Torres’s mother, she described a recurring dream she’s been having, in which she is told that her son is an alien. “Right before the pandemic, I had it again,” she said. “I can’t find him, and then these aliens come and tell me to go with them, and they take me to a ship. And they tell me, ‘Don’t worry about your son. Your son is fine. He’s here with us.’ ” ♦

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [Stay-at-Home Fun](#)

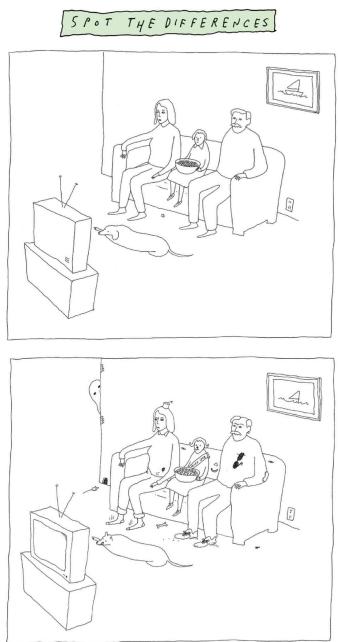
December 28, 2020 Issue

Stay-at-Home Fun

By [Liana Finck](#)

December 21, 2020

For a printer-friendly version, [click here](#).



SPLITTING HAIRS

Match the hair style with its famous owner.



a. FRIDA KAHLO



b. VENUS OF WILLENDORF



c. PRINCE VALIANT



d. ANGELA DAVIS



e. SALVADOR DALI



f. JOSEPHINE BAKER



g. PRINCESS LEIA



h. MR. CLEAN

9. (No picture)

i. WILHELM NELSON /
AENATA ABLEK

ANIMAL SPOONERISMS

A spoonerism is a familiar phrase whose initial sounds have been swapped to make a wacky phrase; for example, "bear bug" and "hair bug." Can you decipher these illustrated spoonerisms?



C - - - - -
B - - - -



F - - - -
B - - - -



B - - - -
F - - - -

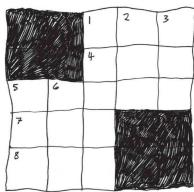


D - - - - -
F - - - -



C - - - - -
L - - - -

SELF-CARE CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1. TIP #1: HAVE A _____ DAY AT HOME!
TURN THE SHOWER INTO A STEAM ROOM.
4. TIP #2: MOISTURIZE! PUT ON SOME LOTION
AND _____ BALM.
5. TIP #3: _____ A POT OF RELAXING SAGE
CHAMOMILE & DOWN.
7. TIP #4: STAY HYDRATED (AND DON'T
FORGET TO _____).
8. TIP #5: GET ON THE PHONE WITH YOUR
FRIENDS AND _____ FOR A WHILE.

DOWN

1. TIP #6: GO BACK TO _____, YOU'VE EARNED IT.
2. TIP #7: EAT AN ENTIRE LEMON-MERINGUE
_____, YOU'VE EARNED IT.
3. TIP #8: OPEN THE MEDITATION _____ ON
YOUR PHONE TO FIND THAT YOUR
FREE TRIAL HAS EXPIRED.
5. TIP #9: _____ ON THE NEIGHBORS.
6. TIP #10: SHIT! YOU FORGOT ABOUT THE
_____ FROM 5-AROSS. COULD THIS
YEAR GET ANY WORSE?

Shouts & Murmurs

- [How to Survive Christmas with Your Toxic Family](#)

December 28, 2020 Issue

How to Survive Christmas with Your Toxic Family

By [Sarah Akinterinwa](#)

December 21, 2020

HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS WITH YOUR TOXIC FAMILY

SO, I'VE SURVIVED CHRISTMAS WITH
MY FAMILY WITHOUT LOSING IT ONCE.

WHAT POINTERS WOULD I GIVE
MYSELF FOR NEXT YEAR?



1. BRIEF YOUR PARTNER



2. MAINTAIN A POKER FACE



3. AVOID POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS



4. TRY TO IGNORE NEGATIVE COMMENTS

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



5. STICK TO YES-OR-NO ANSWERS



6. CATCH UP WITH YOUNGER RELATIVES



7. EXPRESS GRATITUDE

I THOUGHT, WHAT'S A GREAT
GIFT FOR SOMEONE WHO NEEDS
TO LIGHTEN UP A LITTLE?

THANKS,
THIS IS HILARIOUS.



8. SUGGEST AN ACTIVITY

DID SOMEONE TAKE
ONE OF MY CARDS?

WHO'S WINNING?

WAIT, WHEN
DID WE START?



9. STAY OUT OF ARGUMENTS

YOUR TURKEY WAS
DRY AND BLAND!

WELL, YOUR VEGETABLES
WERE COLD AND SOGGY!



10. PLOT YOUR EXIT

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



11. OR... JUST STAY HOME



Sketchbook

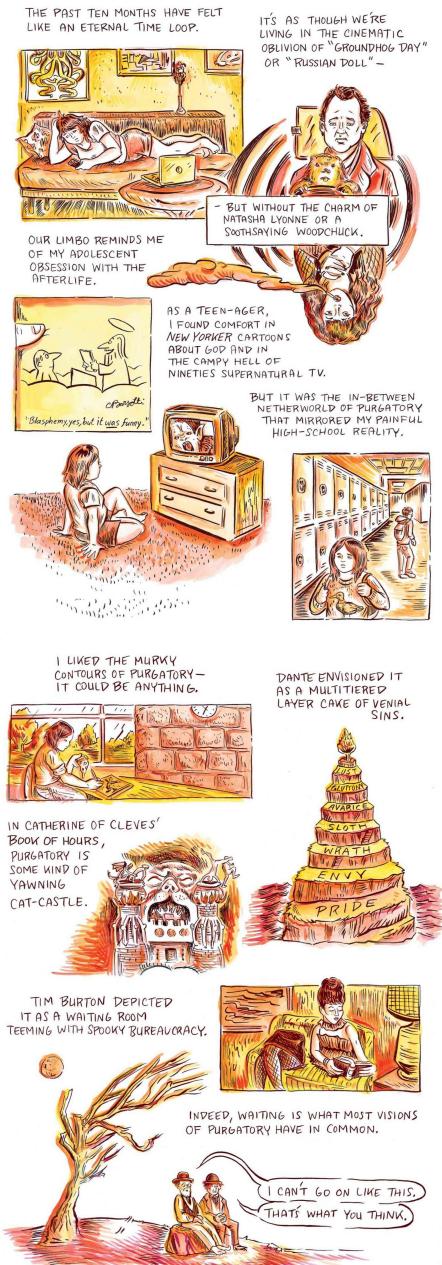
- [The Museum of Purgatory](#)
- [Pandemic Paper Doll](#)
- [My Grandfather's Memories of Life Before Internment](#)
- [Cartoonists Take on Life Drawing](#)

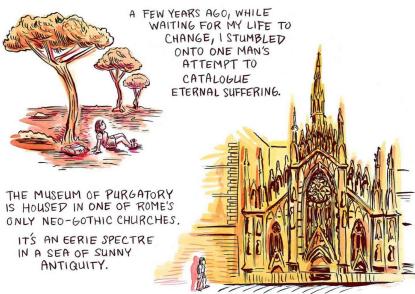
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The Museum of Purgatory

By [Ali Fitzgerald](#)

December 21, 2020





THE MUSEUM OF PURGATORY IS HOUSED IN ONE OF ROME'S ONLY NEO-GOTHIC CHURCHES.

IT'S AN EERIE SPECTRE IN A SEA OF SUNNY ANTIQUITY.

THE INTERIOR IS APPROPRIATELY DARK AND CRYPTIC.

EVERY STEP SEEMS TO ECHO.



EACH OBJECT WAS REPORTEDLY CHARRED BY THE SMOLDERING HANDS OF A SOUL, REACHING OUT FROM PURGATORY.



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



ALL THESE RELICS WERE GATHERED BY A PRIEST FROM MARSEILLE, VICTOR JOUËT.

AFTER A FIRE RAZED THE CHAPEL OF THE CHIESA DEL SACRO CUORE DEL SOFFRIMENTO, IN 1849, JOUËT WENT SIFTING THROUGH THE RUBBLE.

BEHIND THE SCORCHED ALTAR, HE MADE OUT AN IMAGE IMPRESSED ON THE WALL.



HE INTERPRETED THE SHOVEL FORM AS A SAD, TRANSPARENT FACE, A SOUL SEEKING TO CONTACT THE LIVING.

JOUËT READ THIS AS A MESSAGE FROM THE HERE AFTER - HE NEEDED TO HELP OTHER TRAPPED SOULS.



SO HE SET OFF ACROSS EUROPE TO ACQUIRE ARTIFACTS THAT WOULD PROVE PURGATORY'S EXISTENCE TO NONBELIEVERS.



AS AN EX-CATHOLIC AND A CURRENT MNG, I WAS NOT CONVINCED BY JOUËT'S MUSEUM THAT PURGATORY IS AN ACTUAL DESTINATION.

BUT PURGATORY AS A STATE OF MIND SEEMS VERY REAL THESE DAYS.



IT'S A PLACE STRADDLING NORMALCY AND THE ABYSS,

WHERE YOU ASK YOURSELF, "HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?"



A STANDSTILL THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE THINGS SHIFTING AND CHANGING IN OUR WORLD -

WHILE ALLOWING US BRIEF MOMENTS TO APPRECIATE THINGS THAT NEVER CHANGE.



A

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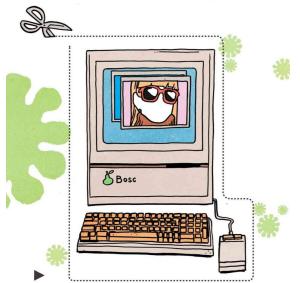
Pandemic Paper Doll

By [Ronald Wimberly](#)

December 21, 2020



"It's the season for festive holiday glee, but with real pandemic lockdowns around the corner you might ask yourself, 'What's the point in dressing up?' Well, you must be thinking of the Zoom meeting you have to take off. Here are four fresh, above-the-shoulder ensembles that will kill at your next socially distanced meeting. Cut on the dotted line to tear them out."



A throwback look for your next design briefing.



Show 'em who's boss. From the comfort of your study with this sharp look. Make sure to turn the volume down so no one can tell your employees know you've earned your place at the top.



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

Love in the time of COVID-19? It's a jungle out there. Flaunt your best side on your next virtual date with this bold look. Try some background foliage to complete the tropical theme.



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Junban

By [Jillian Tamaki](#)

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Life Drawing

By [Edward Steed](#)

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Sketchpad

- [Passing the Time in the COVID-Test Line](#)

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What Did You Accomplish in Line for a COVID Test?

By [Jeremy Nguyen](#)

December 21, 2020



Tables for Two

- [The State of the Bagel](#)

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The State of the Bagel

Passionate, personal takes on the New York staple have popped up at Mark's Off Madison, near Madison Square Park, and Edith's, in Paulie Gee's pizzeria, in Greenpoint.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

December 18, 2020



The other day, hours after I'd hung up the phone with the chef Mark Strausman, he accidentally called me back. "Oops!" he said. "That's what happens when your fingers are covered in olive oil." Strausman was at his new restaurant, Mark's Off Madison (41 Madison Avenue), which debuted last month near Madison Square Park. His hands have been covered in olive oil for most of his sixty-odd years. In the early nineties, the Queens native opened a series of Italian restaurants, including Campagna and the original Coco Pazzo. In 1996, he created Freds at Barneys, turning it into an institution with satellites in Beverly Hills and Chicago.



The bagels are topped with poppy seeds; a play on everything seasoning called Chicago, which includes hot-pepper flakes; salt; or sesame seeds. Photograph by Cassidy Turner for The New Yorker

Last year, Barneys went bankrupt, and Strausman was let go. Never mind: he was already hard at work on Mark's Off Madison, which he abbreviates as M.O.M., to emphasize the Jewish-mother theme. Devotees of Freds will be delighted to find many of its signature dishes resurrected here, including the chopped chicken salad (with avocado, string beans, and pears), Estelle's chicken soup, and bolognese lasagna. But hand-painted letters on a glass wall in the dining room advertise what is, in my opinion, M.O.M.'s biggest draw. "Not Your Grandfather's Bagels," they read, with "Not" crossed out. In the August of his career, Strausman is chasing his youth, attempting to re-create the bagels (plus bialys) that he remembers eating as a kid.



One of the menu's bagel sandwiches features house-smoked salmon, house-cultured cream cheese, lettuce, and shallots pickled in amba, a mango-based Iraqi-Jewish condiment. Photograph by Cassidy Turner for *The New Yorker*

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



After they're boiled in honey water, the bagels are baked in the wood-fired oven at the Greenpoint pizzeria Paulie Gee's. Photograph by Cassidy Turner for The New Yorker

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

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



In addition to bagels, Edith's offers pastries such as schnecken, a traditional German-Jewish morning bun, whose name translates to "snails." Photograph by Cassidy Turner for The New Yorker

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

The Art World

- What Are Artists For?

What Are Artists For?

A new MOMA exhibition surveys a time when artistic independence was often sacrificed to ideology.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

December 21, 2020



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

ideological advertisement, when individuals sacrificed their artistic independence to programs of mass appeal.

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



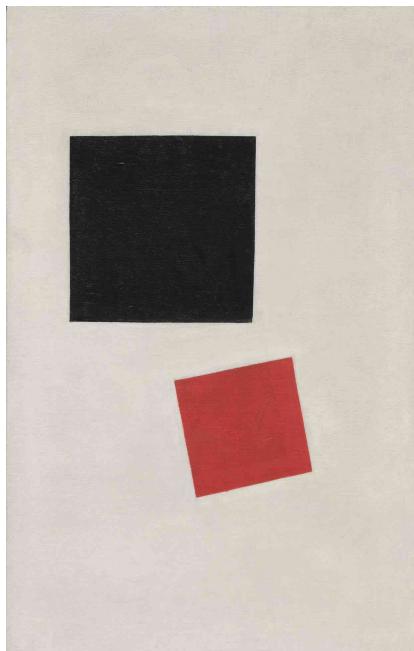
“*The Hand Has Five Fingers*,” by John Heartfield, from 1928. Art work from the Merrill C. Berman Collection; courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Revolution usurped or bypassed the energies of the Russian Empire's wartime avant-gardes, most prominently the metaphysically spirited Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, who is allowed a perfunctory cameo in "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor," with one small abstract painting, from 1915. His day was over with the coup of Constructivism. He continued to support the Revolution, but his manner was adjudged too esoteric for proletarian tastes. Central to the new dispensation was the extravagantly gifted Alexander Rodchenko, who was really—almost helplessly—an artist, despite his militant posturing. In 1921, he painted three monochrome canvases—red, yellow, and blue—and announced that that was that for painting, which was henceforth obsolete. He also posed for a chic photograph as a platonic socialist worker, sporting a uniform of his own design and standing amid his own abstract sculptures. The celebrity gesture ran riskily afoul of Soviet impersonality and was not repeated. When, in 1932, he was accused of "bourgeois formalism," he retreated to sports photography, finding a safe harbor that was denied his movement colleague Gustav Klutsis, a master of photomontage whose worshipful imagery of Josef Stalin didn't forestall his execution, on unclear grounds, in 1938. Rodchenko's diminution illustrates the Soviet tragedy of formal and visionary genius that was ground underfoot even before the inception, in 1928, of Stalin's ruinous first Five Year Plan, and of the coerced visual banalities of socialist realism. Not that the *MOMA* show indulges in historical drama. Its focus is scholarly, separately documenting creators who, as one redemptive credit to Soviet social reform of the time, include a great many women. It builds knowledge. Meaning is up to us.

Art happens when someone wants to do it. Advertising and propaganda start from given ends and work backward to means. There's just enough genuine art in the exhibition to hone this point. The small Malevich, of cockeyed red and black squares on white, elates. Then there's my favorite work, which I'd like to steal: a version of the sublimely sophisticated Liubov Popova's "Production Clothing for Actor No. 7" (1922). A black-caped, robotic figure extends a square red sleeve like a smuggled Suprematist banner. Personal flair and practical use merge. (What would Popova's fate have been if she hadn't died of scarlet fever in 1924, at the age of thirty-five? The Moscow art world adored her.) Among a few other serious gems included for passing reference, the curators Jodi Hauptman, Adrian Sudhalter, and Jane Cavalier hazard a Piet Mondrian from 1921, "Composition with Red, Blue, Black,

Yellow, and Gray." I wonder if the painting will give you, as it does me, a shock of recognition of true artistry: decisions made not for but with a purpose, as captivating in the context of happy workers working, a heroic soldier standing at the ready, and Stalin strolling among his subjects as is Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee.

Art unaffected by personality is sterile. That needn't constitute a failure. It may be a clear-eyed choice made on principle. Many things are more important than art. Today, imperatives of racial and social justice preoccupy numerous artists. Hard light is wanted in a crisis; away with moonbeams. What needs saying conditions how it's said, which means accepting the chance that, should conditions change, the work may prove to be ephemeral. No living artist I know of, however fervently activist, is renouncing art as a distraction from moral commitment, as the more extreme Constructivists did. But a good deal of recent polemical art suggests a use-by date that is not far in the future. Aesthetic judgment, based in experience, confirms differences between what is of its time and what, besides being of its time, may prove timeless. I feel that our present moment, marked by imbroglios of art and politics, forces the issue, even in face of tendencies a century old.



"Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension," by Kazimir Malevich, from 1915. Art work from © the Museum of Modern Art; licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, N.Y.

As the exhibition unfolds, artists-penitent, shrinking from the perils of originality, dominate in Russia. Careerist designers teem in the West, with

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

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

think of him as martyred by his own high church: a trashed prototype of the Soviet new man. His funeral was one of the largest in the regime's history.

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

Already Two

It's already two *a.m.* You're likely asleep.

The Milky Way's a silver river through the night.

I'm in no hurry; I'll not storm your dreams with the lightning bolts of telegrams.

"It's not you," as they say. "It's we."

Love's boat has crashed on our lives.

But we've already closed out our tab,
so there's no need to list each
pain, pinprick, pang.

You watch: silence settles on the earth.

The night taxes the sky of its stars.

In such an hour one stands up and speaks
to the ages, to history, and all creation. ♦

The Pictures

- Eugene Ashe Time-Travels to the Harlem of the Past

[December 28, 2020 Issue](#)

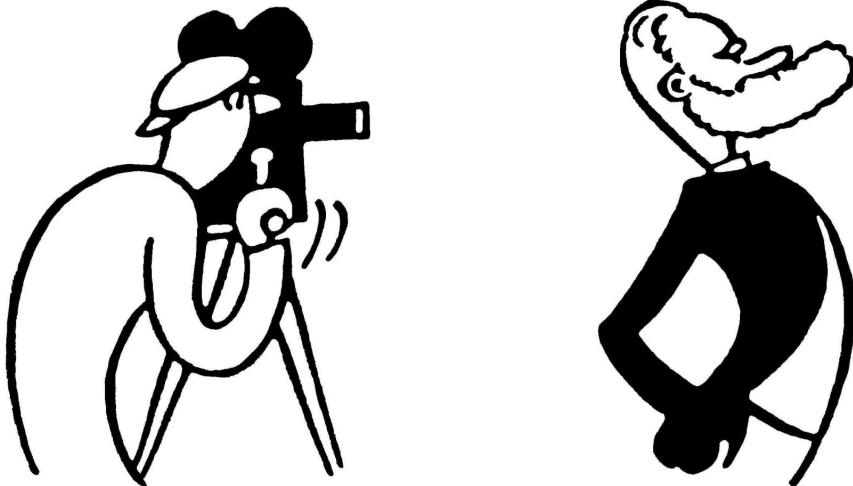
Eugene Ashe Time-Travels to the Harlem of the Past

With “Sylvie’s Love,” the director realized his dream of making an old-fashioned big-screen romance—like “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”—with Black characters.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

December 21, 2020

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



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

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

Because of Thompson’s schedule, he couldn’t shoot on location, so he re-created Harlem on Hollywood back lots, taking visual cues from old family photos. He pulled one up on his phone: his father in front of a blue tail-finned Chevy, with Ashe’s older brother, Tony, in a kid-size suit from Barneys. “This is what Black folks looked like,” Ashe said. His mother’s cousin Juanita Hardy was Poitier’s first wife, and Ashe remembers visiting them in Pleasantville, in Westchester County. “There’d be all kinds of people there, like Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee,” he said. Sylvie, after breaking up with Robert, moves to the suburbs with her husband, who disapproves of her burgeoning television career. Ashe’s mother also worked, at a telephone company. “I don’t think my mother was going to be happy sitting around being a housewife,” he said. His parents split up when he was thirteen: like the movie, a not quite happy love story. “You look at these old pictures and you wonder. It looks so idyllic, right?”

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

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

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

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

The Theatre

- A One-Man Musical About Mother Teresa

A One-Man Musical About Mother Teresa

Heather Christian and Joshua William Gelb present the saint's life story from a closet.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

December 21, 2020



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

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

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

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

“I Am Sending You the Sacred Face,” which Gelb directed with the choreographer Katie Rose McLaughlin, opens with the sound of a buzzing mosquito. Gelb’s closet has been draped in silvery tinsel; dressed as Mother Teresa, he stands inside it like an icon in a church niche, a makeup ring light transfigured into a glowing white halo over his head. (His costume pairs the saint’s trademark blue-striped wimple with a less orthodox sparkly sequinned gown.) He claps, and the scene transforms into a Renaissance triptych, with Gelb framed in each gold-edged panel. Stivo Arnoczy is responsible for the wizardly video design, which uses a series of loops and alternating simultaneous streams to multiply Gelb like the loaves and fishes, while Kristen Robinson’s dazzling scenography serves as a reminder of the trippy strain that runs through Catholic aesthetics. Take a look at the Resurrection panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece, with its funky boudoir Jesus floating before an orb of psychedelic light, and recall that the monks for whom Matthias Grünewald painted his masterpiece cared for peasants dying of St. Anthony’s fire—an illness marked by hallucinations which was caused by eating rye infected with the same strain of fungus that was used, centuries later, to make LSD.

Amid this splendor, Mother Teresa introduces herself. “I wear shoes that do not fit me. / Stink and sweat, refuse a fan, a phone, a TV / praise my lousy bed and head,” she sings. “My commonality with those I serve gives dignity.” This is the saint known the world over, the radically humble caretaker of the poor, come to us in the unlikely guise of a rock star. Gelb, who moves in precise, rhythmic jerks, flings his body toward us, demanding contact, attention; he braces himself against his closet’s walls and leans out, as if strung to the prow of a ship, to sing furiously into our faces. Mother Teresa, urgent and angry, wants us to look at the ugliness of poverty and see a plague of human greed and indifference—to realize that humans, not God, must be responsible for ending it.

But she doubts that she can live up to the standard that she preaches. Her motives are impure. She describes her first calling, to be a nun, as coming from a phone in her heart (made wittily manifest as a red landline whose corkscrew cord is attached to Gelb’s chest). This call is easy enough to obey, but a second one terrifies her. God, in the form of a lush, “Rocky Horror”-style red mouth, commands her to serve the poor. “You probably will not,” God says. He is mocking her. Teresa panics; she equivocates. Even after she

accepts the mission, she battles with herself, ashamed of the pride that she takes in her own humility. And she struggles, hideously, with a dark night of the soul—a fifty-year period of miserable distance from God, which, in reality, began shortly after she received her calling and lasted until her death. Though most of Christian’s language is her own, she draws on Mother Teresa’s letters, published after her death, to reveal the extent of the saint’s anguish. Her Teresa speaks of having no soul, of being empty, undefended, a vessel waiting hopelessly to be filled. There is a bitterness, even a sour humor, to her resignation. “I always said if they ever canonize me, I would want to be known as a patron saint of darkness,” she says—one more prayer that has gone unanswered.

Gelb’s performance, built on metered gesture and pantomime, is a shrewd answer to the trick question of how to embody an icon. He doesn’t, because he can’t. His Mother Teresa is about as far from the stooped, wrinkled, beneficent postcard version of the woman as you can get. (She has equally little to do with the portrayal of the nun as a grifter and a hypocrite which is favored by her detractors.) Blasting away accumulated layers of veneration, Gelb and Christian honor the unknowable mystery of the person underneath, an ordinary woman living out an extraordinary life. The show was made with the help of a “drag dramaturg,” Dito van Reigersberg, and it’s refreshing to see drag, a form that tends to codify femininity even as it celebrates it, used in so strange and sexless a way, its familiar tropes scrapped and reinvented. Anyone can try sainthood on, for an evening, to see how it fits. One of Christian’s points is that being Mother Teresa every day was its own kind of performance: “a medieval darkness done to a modern woman—so it was *quite* a show.” The saint committed wholly to the act, and the world watched in awe, while beneath the spectacle a woman labored, hidden, trying not to be seen. ♦

Year's Best

- [Singing, Spieling, and Shvitzing on the Low Cut Connie Live Stream](#)

[December 28, 2020 Issue](#)

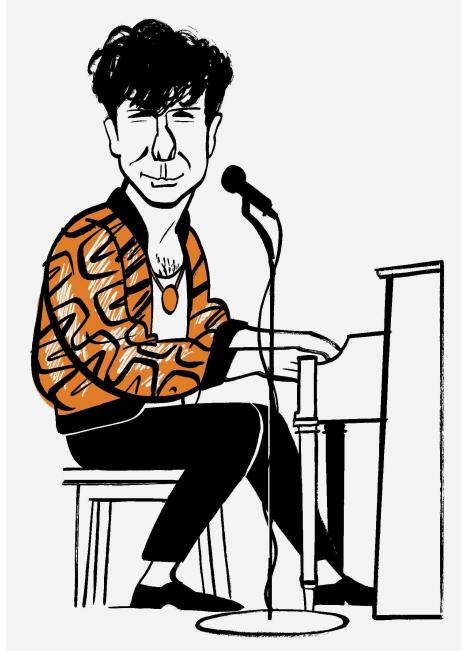
Singing, Spieling, and Shvitzing on the Low Cut Connie Live Stream

Springsteen, Obama, Elton John, and a hundred and fifty thousand other fans are tuning in to Adam Weiner's Mr. Rogers-meets-Little Richard persona.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

December 21, 2020

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



Adam Weiner Illustration by João Fazenda

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

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

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

What has enabled him to show off his spongy brain, as well as his chops and his bountiful good vibes—Little Richard meets Mr. Rogers, maybe—is his twice-weekly interactive live stream, called “Tough Cookies,” which he began in March. Deprived of the thrill and the income of performing live, he started broadcasting from the guest room of his row house, in South Philadelphia.

“We had no plan,” he said. He’d driven up to Manhattan to accept the honor, in a midtown pocket park. He had on a black hoodie, a jean jacket, faded black jeans, and a silver mask, which seemed almost to reach the front edge of his Jerry Lee Lewis curls. “We just turned the phones on and hung out. And there was no audience or laughter or applause. I didn’t know how many people were watching or if they’d like it. All I knew was that at the end of the hour I was lying on the floor in my underwear, covered in sweat.” The next stream attracted a hundred and fifty thousand views. Realizing that this

was going to become a regular thing, he christened it “Tough Cookies.” “I named it after the people who watch it,” he said. Among them were nurses in *Covid* wards who pinned their phones, in ziplocks, to the wall, and viewers in more than forty countries, including Lebanon and Afghanistan.



“Hon, it’s not daytime yet. Those are just our neighbor’s Christmas lights.”
Cartoon by Arantza Peña Popo

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

The death of George Floyd, and the tumult that followed, brought some extra seriousness to the proceedings, but the aim remained uplift. After almost seventy episodes, Weiner has played some six hundred covers, sometimes in medley—say, “War Pigs” into “Macho Man”—and a hundred originals. A disquisition on the origins of Cardi B’s “*WAP*” one night took

him back to 1929, to “Wet It,” by the female impersonator Frankie (Half Pint) Jaxon.

“I feel like I left the music business and I’m in the entertainment business,” Weiner said. “I feel like I have my own TV show.” He was sort of amazed that he hadn’t heard from HBO.

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

Later, outside Mimi’s, a decked-out figure in high heels, of indeterminate everything, strutted past. Weiner’s eyes, visible between mask and pompadour, followed. “That’s what I miss about New York,” he said. “The mystery.” ♦

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