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Goings On

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Goings On

Nancy Shaver Is the Real Deal

Also: Murray Hill's holiday variety show, Kara Young and Nicholas Braun in "Gruesome Playground Injuries," James L. Brooks's anti-romantic comedy "Ella McCay," and more.

By **Hilton Als, Dan Stahl, Sheldon Pearce, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, Hua Hsu**

December 12, 2025



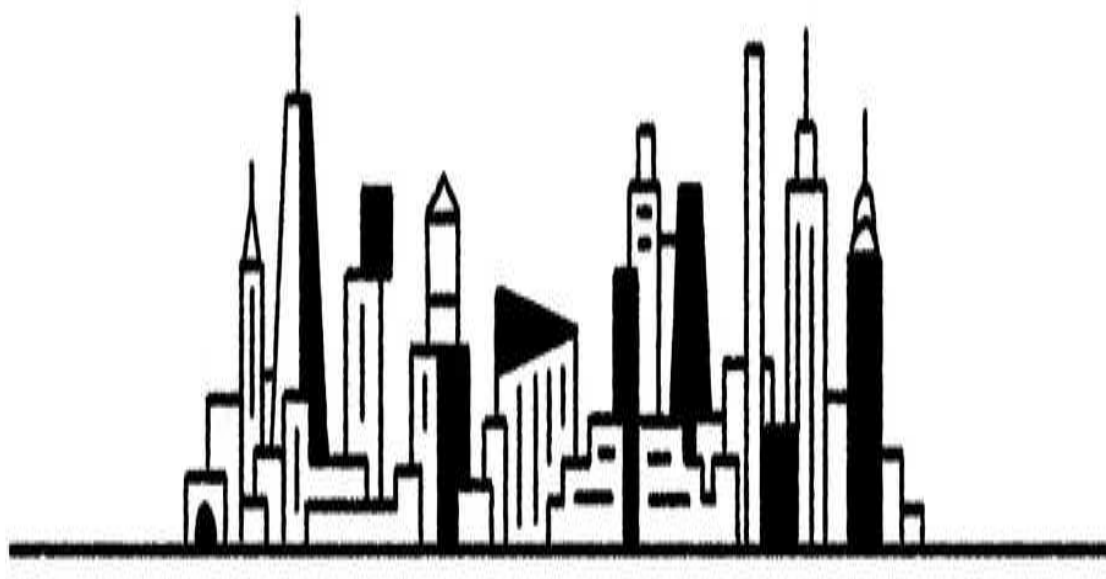
For a time, I lived in a little town in upstate New York. The point was to “get away,” even though I didn’t know what I was getting away from. Sometimes, to relieve myself from the boredom of my own words—I was trying to write—I’d take a walk in the village; I especially liked to stop at a store where I once bought a beautiful big light bulb. The store was like an old curiosity shop, and I liked being enveloped by its warmth. Later, I learned that it was operated by the artist **Nancy Shaver**, and suddenly everything made sense: the small space was curated with a discerning eye. It’s that eye—the uniqueness of it—that you’ll see in Shaver’s jewel of a show, “**Bus Stop**” (at the Derek Eller gallery, through Jan. 10). It’s a show about squares—how, when they are assembled in interesting ways, they can

yield different emotional landscapes. But Shaver's squares, composed of wooden blocks and fabric, or paper and acrylic, have a rigor that doesn't invite comparison with anything but themselves. She's no Mondrian, she's a Shaver, and, as such, has her own idea about form, which, despite her interest in the grid, isn't tight: her colors and ideas jump out at you with the force of the best abstraction. One witty piece, "Fruit Box," for instance, encases blocks in various shades of blue and orange in a looser but no less intentional display—it's Shaver taking Joseph Cornell for a spin, and coming out on the other side as less romantic, certainly, but no less joyful about how form itself tells its own story.



Earlier in her career, Shaver made different work and, over at the elegant **American Art Catalogues** gallery and publisher, a three-part show will display some examples of Shaver's pictures made in the nineteen-seventies that are a very nice complement to the work at Derek Eller. (Some block pieces are at the American Art Catalogues as well). Curated with sensitivity and finesse by the artist Jared Buckhiester and the gallerist Grant Schofield, the gelatin-silver prints—one nicely cropped picture is from a Sears catalogue—belong in spirit to the Pictures Generation, a group of artists, including Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo, who were responding to Watergate fatigue and a world defined by image-making. (MTV was just around the corner.) But Shaver's images are more inward, and so delicate in

their evocation of themselves—the picture’s the thing—that they gather like beautiful vapors in your head and stay there, like a weather front you can’t forget.—*Hilton Als*



About Town

Performance

For those without family to see—or with family who don’t want to see them—the holidays can be a drag. Cue the pencil-mustached entertainer Murray Hill, who created a Christmas variety show for this subpopulation in New York City twenty-five years ago. Since then, “**A Murray Little Christmas**” has found a wider audience, as has Hill in other endeavors, including a role on HBO’s “Somebody Somewhere.” That show’s stars, Bridget Everett and Jeff Hiller, performed at last December’s iteration; this year, expect more celebrity guests, holiday songs backed by an eleven-piece band, and a choir or two, with Hill’s risqué humor and warmth stringing everything together. Suggested attire: festive, fancy, or, for those on the naughty list, furry suits. —*Dan Stahl* ([Alice Tully Hall](#); Dec. 19-20.)

Post-Punk

For the past fifteen years, the Detroit band **Protomartyr** has established itself as a standard-bearer of noise and post-punk. The group took up their mantle when front man Joe Casey joined the already-paired guitarist Greg Ahee, bassist Scott Davidson, and drummer Alex Leonard, and the quartet harnessed a whirlwind Motor City sound on their albums “No Passion All Technique” (2012) and “Under Color of Official Right” (2014). Planted firmly at the center of the band’s maelstrom appeal was “The Agent Intellect,” a dynamic album from 2015 that stretched a mystifying and blistering songcraft to its breaking point, moored by Casey’s arcane lyrics and lurching baritone. This show commemorates that defining LP’s tenth anniversary; the record has only grown more urgent with time.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Warsaw](#); Dec. 19.)

Off Broadway



“Phylactery”: a small box containing Hebrew texts sometimes worn by Jewish men during prayers. It’s also one of the fiendishly difficult words given to contestants in “**The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee**,”

now getting its first N.Y.C. production since a Tony-winning Broadway run from 2005 to 2008. The revival has been updated with occasional topical references, but its power derives from the innately dramatic contest structure, so ingeniously developed by the late composer William Finn and the book writer Rachel Sheinkin that each elimination comes as a surprise. The characters, such as the self-important, mucosal William Barfée (Kevin McHale, of “Glee”), are as eclectic as the words they spell; the show’s greatest triumph is revealing the humanity behind their idiosyncrasies.—*D.S. ([New World Stages](#); through April 12.)*

Dance

The choreographer **Marla Phelan** is interested in the birth of stars—not Barbra Streisand or Lady Gaga but the cosmic kind. Working with the astrophysicist Blakesley Burkhart, she has made “Birth + Carnage,” a dance production in which performers mimic the patterns of star formation and other celestial motion. The dancers’ bodies are influenced by gravity but also by human forms of attraction and repulsion. Constellating, colliding, and collapsing, they mirror a digital installation of astrophysical computer simulations, drawing emotional coloring from a score by James Newberry.—*Brian Seibert ([La MaMa](#); Dec. 19-21.)*

Movies



With “**Ella McCay**,” James L. Brooks, a longtime rom-com champion, directs his first feature film in fifteen years. In some ways, it’s a blatant throwback, but, in others, an acrid tweak of the genre. The action is set mainly in 2008, when Ella (played by Emma Mackey), a thirty-four-year-old policy wonk who is her unnamed state’s lieutenant governor, ascends to the governorship. Then her private life goes haywire: her estranged father (Woody Harrelson) shows up, and her husband (Jack Lowden) feels neglected. Flashbacks to Ella’s adolescence set up her dilemmas; despite the heartwarming story that’s revealed, this is an anti-romantic comedy of failed males and the trouble they cause. Brooks gazes hopefully at a new generation of self-unsure men whose acceptance of weakness is their strength; as for Ella, she’s merely the movie’s figurehead. Jamie Lee Curtis plays Ella’s worldly-wise aunt.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

Off Broadway

Remember when you were eight years old, climbing trees, carrying your bike up with you, and then pedalling off the school roof? Me neither. But such is the world of Rajiv Joseph’s “**Gruesome Playground Injuries**,” in which the dauntless Doug (“Succession” ’s Nicholas Braun) does exactly that, then meets Kayleen (two-time Tony winner Kara Young) in the school

infirmary, where she's recovering from a stomach ache. Subsequent scenes hop forward and backward in time, each centered on forms of harm: an eye blown out by a firecracker, thighs slit with a razor blade. The actors' transformations to embody their shifting ages, abetted by Sarah Laux's evocative costumes, are a tour de force, but neither they nor the queasy attempts at humor prevent the feeling of watching trauma porn.—*D.S.* ([*Lucille Lortel*](#); *through Dec. 28.*)

What to Listen to

Hua Hsu on alternatives to the usual holiday tunes.

By now, you're probably tired of all that holiday music. It sounded great as you were clearing the dishes on Thanksgiving, but the mirth has begun to feel oppressive. Here are some alternative expressions of good will, cheer, and peace on Earth.

Jackson 5, "In Japan!"

A Christmas soul playlist that was on non-stop rotation eventually sent me down a Motown rabbit hole, reminding me of this live gem recorded in Osaka in 1973. It captures the Jacksons in a moment of transition—no longer the cherubs of "ABC"—and experimenting with a looser, funkier sound.



Mavis Staples, “Sad and Beautiful World”

This is one of the year’s most surprising albums, in which the eighty-six-year-old gospel legend covers everyone from Curtis Mayfield and Leonard Cohen to Frank Ocean and Sparklehorse. Lush and serene, with a spryness that makes you feel hope for what lies ahead.

Kim Chang-Wan, “An Essay with a Guitar”

There’s a scene in the Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook’s deliriously grim “No Other Choice” set to Kim’s “Let’s Walk On,” a delicate, haunting piece of loner folk. Kim’s 1983 album is a sparse guy-and-guitar masterpiece, a slightly bummed soundtrack for looking out the window as the sun sets at 4:30 *P.M.*

Real Lies, “Summer Rain EP”

The London duo Real Lies make dance tunes that manage to feel epic and twee at the same time. They’ve been one of my favorite acts for more than a decade, and I admire how they never do things the easy way. Their latest single came out in November, yet it’s an amped-up celebration of bygone bliss called “Summer Rain.” It’s simply too soon to look forward to 2026. But I know that, when the time comes, I’ll still be nodding along to “Let the Lips Fall Where They May,” a breezy blast of New Order-esque pop.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [*How to buy less and feel smug about it*](#)
- [*Your life is not a plot*](#)
- [*A cozy eggplant-pasta recipe*](#)

Photo Booth

A Greenlandic Photographer's Tender Portraits of Daily Life

Inuuteq Storch set out to rediscover Inuit culture that was suppressed by Danish colonizers, by finding its traces in the everyday.

By Dawn Chan

December 06, 2025

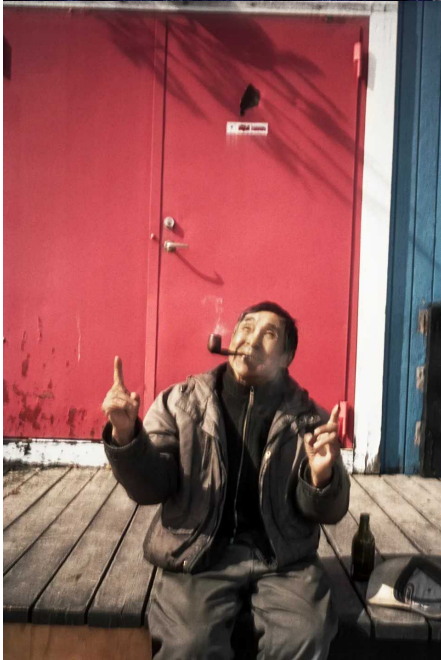


The thirty-six-year-old Greenlandic photographer Inuuteq Storch didn't know much about Inuit culture growing up. In school, for instance, he was taught about ancient Greek deities, but there was no talk of a native pantheon of gods. About ninety per cent of the Greenlandic population are Lutherans, a legacy of Danish colonial rule. So thoroughly did European missionaries stigmatize Inuit beliefs that, even now, the more pious members of an older generation consider an appreciation of Indigenous spirits to be a sign of something demonic afoot. The word "Torngarsuk"—a shape-shifting Inuit spirit believed to assist shamans—is today used as a swear word. Storch, though, saw in the deity an opportunity to rediscover the culture of his ancestors. Four years ago, he got a tattoo of Torngarsuk along the span of

his left forearm, in the form of a bearlike creature with beady eyes. In a recent conversation, he described himself as part of a generation of younger Greenlanders trying to rediscover Inuit traditions. “We talk about how our culture has been erased,” he said, “and what we know now from the past.”



Tattoos themselves were among the Inuit practices suppressed by European settlers, and they turn up throughout the fifty-four photographs on view in Storch’s current solo exhibition at *MOMA P.S.1.*, “[Soon Will Summer Be Over](#).” One image features a man stretching open his jacket collar to reveal intricate curlicues and radial lines extending from his Adam’s apple, like something bursting forth from within. Storch took the photos across Greenland between 2015 and 2025, capturing offhanded tableaux and candid portraits of the people around him caught in mundane moments: eating, taking out the trash, catnapping in sleeping bags.



The stark Greenlandic landscape is a persistent presence in Storch's photos, and low, horizontal sunlight is everywhere. In one of Storch's pictures, an old man on a wooden porch angles his face up toward the sun. In another, a knockout image featuring two children resting on their backs, sunlight blazes with an almost divisive intent, turning one child's eyeglasses opaque with its glare while leaving his friend's face in shadow. Looking at Storch's work, my mind went to Emily Dickinson's musings on a "certain Slant of light, Winter Afternoons." But Dickinson was observing her world at a

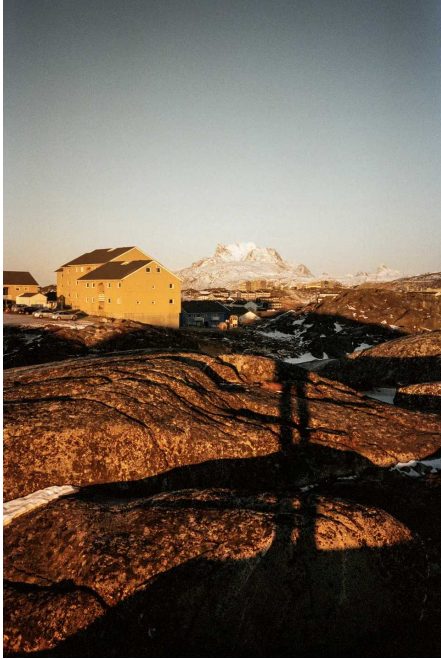
latitude of forty-two degrees. Sunlight means something else entirely in photos made above or near the Arctic Circle, where noon could strike in darkness, depending on the season, and where golden hour might be a nearly constant affair. Storch told me that, at this time of year, sunsets last much longer in Greenland: “Fiery and very slow. Colorful.”



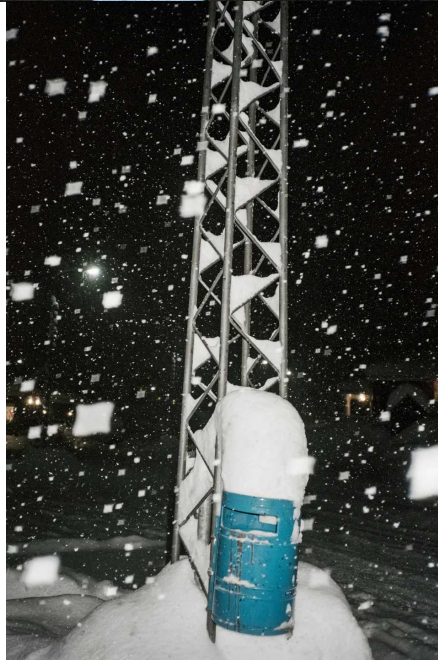
Storch grew up in Sisimiut, a town of some fifty-five hundred people, with no intention of becoming an artist. His father, a professional baker, would

sometimes ask him to do menial tasks in the kitchen. Storch would scrub pans to the sound of public radio, its volume turned way up to cut through the sounds of machinery. In his free time, he liked playing music and building things, including paper airplanes augmented with specialized folds. He planned to become an engineer, but discovered an interest in photography through skateboarding, documenting his friends performing tricks. In 2009, he staged a small photo show at a local venue, whose director suggested that he attend Fatamorgana, a photography school in Copenhagen. He enrolled there, then did another year of training at the International Center for Photography, in New York.





Before Donald Trump [began calling](#) for the United States to annex Greenland—a prospect that a reported eighty-five per cent of Greenlanders oppose—plenty of Americans hadn’t given much thought to Greenland. American curators and critics certainly hadn’t. Now Storch is navigating the art world’s inclination to cast him as a cultural ambassador of some kind. Last year, he became the first Greenlander to represent Denmark at the Venice Biennale, and while there he pasted letters spelling “*KALAALLIT NUNAAT*,” the Greenlandic term for the island, over the word “*DANMARK*,” on the façade of Denmark’s pavilion. At the P.S. 1 show, a video work titled “Anachronism” features grainy, archival footage shot by other Greenlanders, forming a kind of collective portrait: a child exposing the teeth of a freshly hunted polar bear; a view from the hazy window of a twin-engine prop plane. At the same time, Storch is resistant to the idea that he’s somehow representing Greenlandic culture to the outside world. “I’m not saying, ‘This is us,’ ” he explained. “I’m just saying, ‘This is every day.’ ”





Storch mines his own family albums and artifacts, as in the series “Porcelain Souls,” which features a slide carousel projecting photos that Storch’s parents took and letters they sent each other from across the North Atlantic. These scrapbook contents are shown at P.S.1 alongside Storch’s own photographs—a friend in a field of flowers, with a beer bottle in hand, or a group of young people piled into a canary-yellow pickup truck. His work has something in common with that of a young Ryan McGinley, whose point-and-shoot approach was similarly inspired by skater culture, and who also created images of social scenes that doubled as portraits of a time and a place. But whereas McGinley’s grittily intimate style had an erotic edge, Storch’s is tenderly attentive. One of his photo series, “What if You Were My Sabine?,” features images of houseplants, Soviet-style apartment blocks, and nighttime snow. It was named after the Greenlandic former lover of the Danish photographer Jacob Aue Sobol, who made a book of black-and-white pictures set in east Greenland, where he lived with Sabine and her family. Storch considers that book an authentic depiction of living in Kalaallit Nunaat, “because it’s not about Greenland life. It’s about his love with her,” he said. With his own work, Storch has landed on a similar approach. “I was, like, What am I? Who am I in my home town?” he explained. “Turns out, I’m friends and family.”



On and Off the Avenue

A Holiday Gift Guide: Presents for Music Lovers

Our music critic gives a roundup of tactile, old-fashioned ways to honor sound, and the people who make it.

By Amanda Petrusich

November 29, 2025



It's easy to think of music as ephemeral and essentially free, rather than a thing you can dotingly select, acquire, and present to your nearest and dearest. Yet music is a courageous and intimate gift. For decades, lovers—would-be; actual—have deployed painstakingly compiled mixtapes to communicate emotions that felt impossible to express otherwise. Music is a useful, even sacred way to commune with another consciousness. In that spirit, I have purposefully failed to create a list of studio-quality headphones or the best bluetooth speakers. (Much like people who instinctively cringe when someone says “A.I.,” I have an unfair disgust for any and all bluetooth technology.) Instead, here are some tactile, old-fashioned ways to honor sound and the people who make it.

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Surely the best present of all is to manually thwart the dominance of streaming algorithms—simultaneously liberating your loved one from corporate surveillance and the echo chamber of their own taste—by letting the employees of your local record shop take the wheel. Two of my favorite ways to do this are [Luna Music’s Sound Subscription Service](#), which is curated by the staff of this Indianapolis-based shop (\$333 for twelve months, which includes twelve custom-selected albums, free shipping, and a T-shirt), or [The End of All Music’s Record of the Month Club](#) (\$325 a year plus shipping, with bonus goodies each month). The End of All Music—which is located in Oxford, Mississippi, and is, for my money, one of the best record stores in America—also offers an excellent “[We Pick ’Em](#)” option if you’re looking to send a one-time infusion of new tunes. Venmo or PayPal some cash—anywhere from \$50 up, though the shop recommends a budget of around \$150 to \$200 to allow for a broad selection—let the store know a little bit about what you like and dislike, and have one of their crackerjack employees curate a box of records for you. I’m a fairly obsessive follower of new music, with honed and uncompromising tastes, and, whenever I’m feeling burned out by my own proclivities, I get on the horn with Oxford and demand to be saved from myself. (Incidentally, a very good companion gift to any vinyl-based subscription would be Liz Pelly’s excellent “[Mood Machine: The Rise of Spotify and the Costs of the Perfect Playlist](#),” a new book that investigates the grim consolidation of the music industry, and the cascading ramifications of frictionless streaming.)

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True audiophiles might scoff, but I love to buy plug-and-play suitcase turntables for young kids—dropping the needle is such a tactile pleasure, and what happens next can feel almost otherworldly, a kind of conjuring. Secondhand stores are often loaded with old children’s records; keep an eye out for anything released by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, which issued dozens of surprisingly sophisticated kid-friendly LPs in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, by artists such as Ella Jenkins, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie. For the player, there are lots of brands to choose from; to my ears, they all sound about the same (tinny, yet triumphant). [Crosley makes them in a variety of bright colors](#) perfect for a kid’s chaotic quarters. (My four-year-

old has a Crosley Cruiser Plus in a shade called “tye-dye”; on weekend mornings, she likes to play the Buck Owens song “[I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail](#)” as many times as she can before I finally come staggering in.)

For the charming obscurist in your life, who has already heard everything (and left a lengthy Rate Your Music review), perhaps try this beguiling four LP collection by the heretofore unknown Rhodesian folksinger John Phillips, who has been called “the last great outsider folk discovery of the 20th century.” “[Songs of Gentleness 1969-1976](#)” contains every known recording Phillips made in the nineteen-seventies; there are echoes of Incredible String Band, [Linda Perhacs](#), Donovan, Nick Drake, and [Canned Heat](#).

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Who among us has not been stymied by our own fear and paranoia, left paralyzed and unable to write? (Never me, of course.) Any aspiring artist—but especially any aspiring musician—will be grateful for these get-the-muses-going offerings, care of the legendary producer and ambient auteur Brian Eno. In 1975, Eno and the artist Peter Schmidt devised a deck of a hundred cards, each printed with a blunt aphorism intended to crack open some creative conundrum. The deck, called [Oblique Strategies](#), turned fifty this year, but its wisdom (“Don’t break the silence,” “Disconnect from desire,” “Retrace your steps”) is eternal. This past March, Eno also co-authored a short book, “[What Art Does](#),” with the illustrator Bette Adriaanse. The intention is much the same: What if we stopped being scared and let art be art? (Pair the two; await genius.)

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[The Record Runner](#) is billed as “the world’s smallest record player,” which, frankly, is burying the lede—it is also a tiny, self-propelled Volkswagen bus, with a stylus jutting out underneath, that rides around the grooves in an LP. Would I let this thing roll over an exceptionally rare or expensive album? Not a chance. (“We advise you not to operate on invaluable records,” the company pleads.) But is it extremely funny to watch it cruise atop, say, an already kinda scratchy copy of Fleetwood Mac’s “Rumours”? Yes. Sometimes we must choose whimsy over perfection.

Since the British folksinger Nick Drake's death, in 1974, when he was twenty-six, his brief discography (he released three albums between 1969 and 1972, all largely ignored in their time) has been relentlessly, exhaustively mined, so much so that one might understandably pause before purchasing "[The Making of Five Leaves Left](#)," the latest repackaging of Drake's work. The four-disc set collects previously unheard material from the 1968 sessions for Drake's debut, which was produced by the visionary Joe Boyd. But these demos, which strip away extraneous instrumentation, are almost jarringly lovely. The album version of "Fruit Tree" has a complex string arrangement; [the take included here](#), which features only Drake on guitar, is warmer and more surefooted. "Forgotten while you're here, but remembered for a while / A much updated ruin from a much outdated style," Drake sings. I've heard the lyric dozens of times before, but it wasn't until now that I fully understood its prescience.

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The [Stylophone S1 pocket synthesizer](#) has been in production since 1968. I can assure you that you do not need to possess any significant musical skills to have a blast messing around with this thing—make it skronk, make it warble, make it beep, let it whine. It's so little and bizarre, you are instantly freed from trying to sound "expert" or "in tune," and can instead just have a good-ass time generating freaky noises. David Bowie, who famously played a Stylophone on "[Space Oddity](#)," once said it's "the only instrument I take on holiday to compose on," and, if it worked for Bowie, it will surely work for your cool niece.

Speaking of Bowie—an extensive new boxed set titled "[I Can't Give Everything Away \(2002-2016\)](#)" collects Bowie's later works, including his final four albums and various other recordings (there's also a full live set from the Montreux Jazz Festival, recorded in 2002). The physical media version is perhaps for serious Bowie devotees only (it's available as eighteen LPs, or thirteen CDs), though anyone who accidentally stopped paying attention to Bowie's output after his first golden era (1971-83, roughly) should be nudged to explore the work he made this century. He's the rare legacy artist who had a thrilling and vital second act.

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From December, 1966 through April, 1967, Sly and the Family Stone were the house band at Winchester Cathedral, a club in Redwood City, California, with an electric late-night scene (the group usually played from 2 *A.M.* until 5 *A.M.*—big dog hours only!). The band's début LP, "A Whole New Thing," didn't come out until the following October, but, man, they were already cooking. [Sly and the Family Stone's "The First Family: Live at Winchester Cathedral 1967"](#) is the earliest known recording of the group. It consists mostly of raucous, funk-heavy covers (Joe Tex, Otis Redding, Ben E. King). I would file this one under "a record nearly everyone will like."

In 1977, after taking a transformational pilgrimage to India, the harpist and jazz musician Alice Coltrane was building a spiritual practice in southern California. "[Monument Eternal](#)," the book she published that year, was just recently reissued for the first time. Alice's husband, John Coltrane, had died a decade earlier; her grief, deep and acute, led her on a heady quest for spiritual meaning. She was inspired by ecstatic devotionism, and her writing is infused with a certain mystic vibration. It's also very beautiful. (I'd recommend pairing the book with her [fourth album](#), "Journey in Satchidananda," which features accompaniment from Pharoah Sanders—both are potent medicine for anyone feeling vaguely adrift.)

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I like to listen to the radio while I wash dishes or fold laundry or chop onions or do any other mindless yet necessary task. A handsome tabletop radio is good encouragement to take a temporary hiatus from your favorite podcast and see what's actually beaming through the atmosphere. Plug in a [Tivoli Model One](#) and fiddle with the knobs until you find some highly specialized FM station playing only, say, bebop or show tunes or disco (local college radio is especially lawless and wonderful). There's an undeniable romance to so-called terrestrial radio, possibly evidenced by the number of [truly excellent songs about it](#); I love when Paul Westerberg, of the Replacements, hollers, "On the radio once / We sounded drunk," on "[Left of the Dial](#)." But my favorite radio-adjacent lyric might be from Joni Mitchell's "[You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio](#)": "If your head says, 'Forget it' / But your heart's still smoking / Call me at the station / The lines are open."

When I [profiled Metallica](#) for the magazine, in 2022, I spent an enormous amount of time marvelling at the range, playfulness, and ubiquity of the band's merchandise. Though a vintage Metallica T-shirt, replete with holes, is an extremely classic gift in my opinion (it seems, in fact, that one does not even need to enjoy Metallica [to wear one](#)), a more seasonally appropriate item might be this Metallica-themed "I'm Bleeding Glee" [sweater](#), which features art work inspired by the famously revolting cover of "Load," in which the artist Andres Serrano stirred together blood and his own semen. There are also a few ninja stars pictured on it, for good measure. Happy holidays!

\$.00,

Owning your own chopsticks (and therefore getting to toss aside the splintery ones dropped into the takeout bag, alongside a million packets of soy sauce) has always felt inexplicably chic to me. Perhaps combine a feeling of elegance with a love for the thoughtful and dynamic music of Japanese Breakfast by picking up a pair of [Japanese Breakfast chopsticks](#)? On the topic of zany merch, Sabrina Carpenter is honoring the title of her new album with a ["Man's Best Friend"-styled dog shirt](#); meanwhile, if you live with or near an angsty teen who has been spotted wearing black nail polish, Olivia Rodrigo is now offering [a low-slung silver butterfly belt](#) that would look delightful layered over a sequined miniskirt. Alas, the Post Malone x Crocs are long sold out (though I recently spotted a set of [all six pairs](#) on eBay for . . . \$3,200)—but you can still acquire [a large foam finger](#) that says "Let's hear it for the losers." The New York City rock band Geese, whose new album "Getting Killed" will surely top a bevy of year-end lists, is selling a [tote bag](#) with a smoking sedan on it, an allusion to "[There's a bomb in my car!](#)," one of the first and most frantic lines on the album, and an indication of the unhinged genius that follows.

I am both a student and an admirer of iconic cover art, and, on occasion, it's possible to own a piece of your own, or at least something close to it. In 1998, a landscape by the artist [Chris Kysor](#)—a pink highway disappearing into a vista—was used on the cover of Silver Jews' "American Water," one of the best albums of the nineties. Kysor, who was a friend of the singer David Berman, has started painting them again. Likewise, the Asheville-based artist Matthew Reed, whose art has been on the covers of albums by

M. J. Lenderman (“Manning Fireworks”) and Friendship (“Caveman Wakes Up”), sells both [original paintings and prints](#) on his website. Reed’s work is surrealist, sort of (it is certainly funny, strange, and dark), but mostly I find it moving—like on Instagram when someone posts a photo of a life-affirming sunset behind an ExxonMobil. I would also recommend throwing caution to the wind and ordering [a randomly selected thirty-two-by-twenty-four-inch plywood painting](#) by the Brooklyn-based painter [Steve Keene](#), who very often incorporates music into his work (Keene also painted original covers for a variety of indie-rock albums, including Pavement’s “[Wowee Zowee](#)” and the Apples in Stereo’s “Fun Trick Noisemaker”). It might feel nuts to have an art work selected on your behalf, but it is my belief that Keene possesses a kind of supernatural intuition—you will receive the painting you need.

Giving any sort of gift is a privilege and a thrill. Make someone a playlist, sing ’em a weird little song, buy two tickets to a show on a school night, find an original copy of a record they loved when they were thirteen. Keep thrashing against the forces that have made the world (and the holidays) feel so ugly, empty, stupid, and cruel. Or, as David Berman sings on “[The Wild Kindness](#),” a truly perfect track from “American Water,” “I’m gonna shine out in the wild silence / And spurn the sin of giving in.” ♦

The Talk of the Town

- [History's Judgment of Those Who Go Along](#)
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Comment

History's Judgment of Those Who Go Along

Some civil servants and senior officials in the Trump Administration are experiencing bouts of conscience.

By Michael Luo

December 14, 2025



The second Presidency of Donald Trump has been unprecedented in myriad ways, perhaps above all in the way that he has managed to cajole, cow, or simply command people in his Administration to carry out even his most undemocratic wishes with remarkably little dissent. Some civil servants and senior officials, however, are experiencing bouts of conscience. In March, Erez Reuveni, a veteran Justice Department lawyer, was promoted to the position of acting deputy director of the Office of Immigration Litigation. He decided to personally take on the case of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, who had been wrongly sent back to El Salvador, in violation of a 2019 court order. On April 5th, Reuveni told his supervisor he would not sign an appeal brief that said Abrego Garcia was a “terrorist.” According to a whistle-blower

complaint that Reuveni later filed, he said, “I didn’t sign up to lie.” He was suspended and then fired.

Other career prosecutors have chosen to step down. In February, when Trump officials moved to dismiss corruption charges against New York City’s mayor, Eric Adams, it triggered resignations from Danielle R. Sassoon, the interim United States Attorney in Manhattan, and from Kevin O. Driscoll and John Keller, the two officials in charge of the Justice Department’s Public Integrity Section. In September, Erik Siebert, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, resigned, after his investigations into Letitia James and James Comey stalled and Trump demanded that he be fired.

There has been turnover in senior ranks of the military as well. In October, Admiral Alvin Holsey, the head of the U.S. Southern Command, abruptly announced that he would retire at the end of the year. Tensions had reportedly been mounting between Holsey and the Defense Secretary, Pete Hegseth, particularly over the admiral’s concerns about the legality of drone strikes on alleged drug boats in the Caribbean. Now military experts have raised the possibility of war crimes, as lawmakers investigate a drone operation on September 2nd that destroyed a boat and killed everyone on board.

The excesses of the Administration seem only to be escalating. A *ProPublica* investigation, published in late October, found that *ICE* had arrested more than a hundred and seventy American citizens, nearly twenty of whom were children. In November, after the shooting of two National Guard soldiers in Washington, D.C., allegedly by an Afghan national, Trump suspended the issuance of visas for people travelling on an Afghan passport, halted the processing of all asylum claims, and vowed to “permanently pause migration from all Third World Countries.”

Anyone still serving in the Trump Administration must reckon with the reality that, when the government has previously perpetrated egregious miscarriages of justice, history has not been forgiving to those who’ve gone along, however reluctantly. Consider the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. On the morning of December 7, 1941, when Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii,

more than a hundred and twenty-five thousand people of Japanese ancestry lived in the continental United States, most of them on the West Coast. Nearly two-thirds were American citizens. Wild reports—later debunked—of lights signalling to Japanese vessels offshore proliferated. Public fears about a potential enemy attack from within began to spread, even as intelligence officials in Franklin Roosevelt’s Administration believed them to be baseless.

Lieutenant General John DeWitt was the head of the Army’s Western Defense Command. Driven by his own alarmism and his suspicions of members of the “Japanese race,” he began pushing for the removal of people of Japanese descent from the West Coast. The Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, a revered figure in Roosevelt’s Cabinet, initially had doubts about the legality of the plan, as did his deputy, John J. McCloy, though they ultimately supported it, as a matter of military necessity. But lawyers for the Justice Department, who bore responsibility for the handling of “alien enemies,” argued that a mass evacuation was unnecessary and likely unconstitutional.

The debate culminated in a tense meeting, on the evening of February 17, 1942, at the Georgetown home of the Attorney General, Francis Biddle, who had joined the Cabinet only a few months earlier. Edward J. Ennis, the head of the Justice Department’s “aliens” division, and James H. Rowe, the Assistant Attorney General, were forceful in their opposition to the plan. But Biddle, who had also been opposed, was noticeably reticent, Rowe later recalled. Then an Army official drew from his pocket a draft evacuation order, and Biddle revealed that he had dropped his objections to it. Ennis nearly wept.

Two days later, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066, which led to the U.S. government dispatching the entire Japanese American population of California, Oregon, and Washington to ten concentration camps, as Roosevelt initially termed them, in the interior of the country. (The final camp did not close until early 1946.) Justice Department lawyers went on to defend the policy in court and, most controversially, took steps to obscure from the Supreme Court reports that cast doubt on the military justification and showed that Japanese Americans were overwhelmingly loyal to the United States.

In the decades since, numerous historians, as well as members of a federal commission that, in 1981, held hearings across the country, have studied the path to the executive order. The circle of blame has included not just Army and War Department officials but Biddle, who chose to “surrender,” as the historian Peter Irons put it, in his book “Justice at War.” Biddle admitted in his memoirs that, being “new to the Cabinet,” he was reluctant to challenge Stimson, “whose wisdom and integrity I greatly respected.” Irons also scrutinized Ennis’s decision to sign on to a misleading brief to the Supreme Court, observing that “institutional loyalty had prevailed over personal conscience.”

Standing firm on principle sometimes sits opposite other factors, such as fealty to colleagues and professional ambition, but it invariably comes from within. During the early days of the first Trump Administration, Sally Yates, who had been Obama’s Deputy Attorney General and had stayed on as the acting Attorney General, directed her staff not to defend an executive order from Trump restricting travel from several Muslim-majority countries—his so-called Muslim ban. Trump fired her. Several months later, Yates delivered a commencement-week speech to graduates of Harvard Law School, in which she talked about the need to hone the “compass that’s inside all of us.” Introspection about difficult decisions that involve conscience, she said, helps “develop a sense of who you are and what you stand for.” For those in the second Trump Administration, the time to answer those questions could be now. ♦

Audrey Hobert Doesn't Want to Be Described

The “Bowling alley” singer bowls a few frames and explains how her pal Gracie Abrams inspired her to switch from writing for Nickelodeon to writing songs.

By Dan Greene

December 15, 2025



As the singer-songwriter Audrey Hobert descended into the Gutter, a Lower East Side bowling alley, the other day, she shared a confession. One of the singles on her album, “Who’s the Clown?,” is called “Bowling alley,” but that was largely incidental. “I see all these people online who are into bowling and are, like, ‘This means so much to me,’ ” she said. In truth, she had used the word “striking” when writing the first section. “So I had ‘strike’ in my head and was, like—bowling,” she said. “There really was no deeper meaning.”

Hobert, who is twenty-six, had on a loose all-black outfit, and her strawberry-blond hair was up in a messy bun. After slipping on a pair of rented bowling shoes, she rolled her first ball, then excitedly spun around. Only two pins stood. “I just blew myself away,” she said.

She was enjoying a quiet day on the eve of her first tour, in support of the album, a collection of loquacious bops about twentysomething life (thirst traps, boys without headboards, Uber-driver heart-to-hearts) which led [NPR to declare her](#) “pop music’s funniest newcomer.” Two years ago, she was working in a Nickelodeon writers’ room. Only this past October did she do her first full-on, non-acoustic live performance—on “The Tonight Show Starring [Jimmy Fallon](#).” She didn’t mind looking green: “It’s the truth of where I’m at.”

Hobert put on an olive bucket hat with safety-orange lining and knocked down a few more pins. “When I got into this, nobody in my personal life was surprised,” she said. “But I was, and still am.” She has always been an instinctive entertainer—“When my parents would have friends over, I would, like, get up on the table and dance,” she explained—but her aspirations were elsewhere. Her father, Tim, writes and produces sitcoms (“Spin City,” “Scrubs,” “The Middle”), and she aimed to write, too. Narratives came naturally. “Even in high school, I’d have a crush on a guy, and we’d hang out, but nothing would transpire,” she said. “So I would go home and write out the night going the way I wanted it to.”

“I just think the coolest thing you can be is a writer,” she went on. “I like the idea of not needing to be looked at. I don’t think it’s a very cool quality to want to be the star, but I can’t fight that that’s also a part of my personality.”

Between frames, she admired the alley’s brick wall and stained-glass chandeliers. “The ones in L.A. are very dimly lit and have L.E.D. lights everywhere,” she said, of her home-town bowling scene. “I feel like I can lose myself there.” She had lived in New York for two and a half years, primarily to attend N.Y.U.’s dramatic-writing program, but also out of a love for the HBO series “Girls.” “I walked in on my mom watching it when I was a freshman in high school—some kind of sex scene,” she said. “I was, like, ‘I need to watch this,’ so I watched it behind her back. By senior year, we watched the whole last season together, every week on the couch.”

Hobert applied some hand sanitizer and recounted how, while working at Nickelodeon, she took up songwriting on a whim while living with her childhood best friend, the singer Gracie Abrams. After a heartbroken friend had complained, “It’s just pain these days,” the roommates repeated it as a melody. Soon, they had a full song, and then another. Since then, Abrams has released seven of their collaborations, including the chart-topper “That’s So True.”

“She would basically walk in the door from the Eras Tour”—where Abrams opened for [Taylor Swift](#)—“and I’d be there, waiting to write,” Hobert recalled. “Sometimes she was, like, ‘I’m gonna take a nap.’ And I was, like, ‘Don’t take a nap!’ ”

Hobert’s writers’-room experience helped when pursuing her own music. She told record labels that she already had an album title and a cover design (Hobert with her hands in pockets, a clown leering through a window), and a presentation idea: no makeup, wearing her own clothes. “There’s no shtick,” she said. “There’s no ‘This is the kind of thing she is.’ I just don’t want to be described.” She’s since learned that no frills has its snags, too. “There are times I’m, like, God, someone should have told me to fix my hair before I took that picture,” she said.

Hobert rolled another frame, then checked her score—eighty-two. “My deceased uncle’s football number!” she said. Her growing fame has presented a conundrum. “Now that I am being noticed and I feel respected, it’s this weird thing of, like, I want to go back to feeling unnoticed,” she said. “Nothing is quite like locking myself in my apartment, really looking like shit, not seeing anyone, and writing something. It’s where I feel best about myself. It’s kind of all I need.” ♦

Kicks Dept.

Once a Rockette, Always a Rockette

As the group celebrates its hundredth year, former dancers gather to reminisce about the good old days—bingeing Advil, marrying Yalies—and what came after.

By Rachel Syme

December 15, 2025



On a chilly night last month, the Rockette Alumnae Association held its first black-tie charity ball, at the Edison Ballroom, in midtown. It was the culminating event in a weeklong celebration of the troupe’s hundredth anniversary, which also included a Sardi’s meetup and a family brunch. Some three thousand women have high-kicked on the stage at [Radio City Music Hall](#), and more than four hundred of them turned up at the Edison. Most had on some vestige of showgirl glam—sequined gowns, feathered fascinators, fur stoles. One eighty-five-year-old woman with a silvery bob (Rockette years: 1959 to 1962) pored over a display of archival photographs.

“I’m looking for me,” she said. “So we’re looking for a black-and-white shot.” She was Lani Drake-Barovick, from Bement, Illinois. “I auditioned

for Mr. Markert himself!” she said, referring to the St. Louis impresario who, in 1925, created a high-kicking troupe called the Missouri Rockets, modelled after a British act called the Tiller Girls. (They became the Rockettes in 1932, after relocating to New York City.) She explained that as a relatively petite dancer—she’s five-six—she stood near the end of the chorus line. “Taller girls to the center, shorts to the side,” her niece, who had come with her, said. Drake-Barovick was not shy about touting one benefit of being a Rockette: “We had the opportunity to marry very well. All the fraternities of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton wanted to win a date with a Rockette. A lot of my sisters met their husbands that way. I didn’t want to do that myself, but I did date Robert Duvall’s brother.”

Back in those days, the regimen was strict: each Rockette had to kick “eye-high” (exactly to her eyebrows, no lower, no higher), she had to be between five feet six and five feet ten and a half, and she was subject to surprise “weigh-ins.” The bonding was intense; members adopted the motto “Once a Rockette, always a Rockette.”

During cocktail hour, alums mingled and sipped Rockette-tinis made from pomegranate vodka. A blond superior-court judge from Georgia named Kay Ann King (1982) chatted with a blond former Miss Michigan—and current regional product trainer for BMW—named Audrie Chernauckas Jeffords (2000-02, 2005-08). “I left the Rockettes to go to law school, and now I’m a judge,” King said.

“Oh, my God!” Chernauckas Jeffords said. “I left law school to join the Rockettes! I was at Pepperdine, and this opportunity came up, and I just never looked back. Now I work in the automotive industry.”

A third blonde, Gretchen Esch Kyte (1997-2008), who owns a dance-photography business, sidled up. “I honestly miss it so much,” she said. “Though, O.K., I don’t miss the kicks. I always had trouble meeting my eyes. I was so flexible, I always wanted to go higher.”

At dinner, each table featured a centerpiece of Vegas-y feathers. There was a performance by a rotating group of Rockette alums (the oldest was sixty-four) called the Breathless Twelve. They sashayed in sparkly black minidresses, and a singer, Sam Higdon, a brother-in-law of one of the

dancers, crooned “Everything Old Is New Again.” The number ended, naturally, with a kick line, and the room exploded in whoops and cheers.



“You know, the best show was always what was happening in the dressing room,” a woman with short gray hair, Joanne DiMauro (1993, 1995-96), said. “When you do five shows a day, you get close. We did Secret Santa. We threw each other’s baby showers. It was like living at the North Pole.”

“God, remember that steel stage?” Colleen Dunn (1990-91) chimed in, referring to the surface the ladies had to tap-dance on. “It was so hard on the body. I remember that one woman would begin every show by sitting on a heating pad and taking two Advil.”

DiMauro nodded: “We had to find all these creative ways to keep it fresh for ourselves. One of the dancers would call on the intercom and say, ‘O.K., gals, it’s a “mole show” today, everyone wear beauty marks!’ Whatever could keep us going.”

“When I started, I thought this was going to be a cinch,” Dunn said. “But this is the hardest job in New York.”

The two turned to the stage as Lillian Colón, the septuagenarian president of the Alumnae Association and the first Latina Rockette, stepped up to give a

speech. “Now *she* has a story,” DiMauro whispered. “She grew up as an orphan. Then she married a stagehand, as so many Rockettes do.” (Later, Colón said, “We all married stagehands, because we had our pick!”)

These days, the Rockettes organization has somewhat loosened the strictures. You do have to be at least five-five to audition, but, as a Black Rockette named Theresa Pelicata (2002, 2005-16) put it, efforts have been made to “integrate the line.”

“I think we were lucky to be Rockettes when we were,” Katie Rayle (2000-03), a willowy brunette who owns a Pilates studio, said. “We didn’t have to live in the era of rigidity, and we were allowed to be a little more individualized. But, in the era of social media, it all has to be even more perfect. But, then, that’s the personality this attracts. You have to like getting notes after every show telling you what you did wrong. Still, when it all works and every woman on the line is moving to music? There’s nothing like it in the world.” ♦

Postcard from Italy

The Priest of the Mediterranean Diet

The mayor of the small community of Pollica, Italy, has dedicated his life to making people healthier. Will it get him a dinner with Zohran Mamdani?

By Rebecca Mead

December 15, 2025



Stefano Pisani became mayor of Pollica, a small community in the region of Cilento, in southern Italy, under the worst possible circumstances. Fifteen years ago, his predecessor, Angelo Vassallo, was assassinated—mowed down by nine bullets—after attempting to crack down on the drug trade. “For the first few hours, I thought, This is not my mission,” Pisani, who had been Vassallo’s deputy, recalled recently.

Very quickly, Pisani changed his mind, realizing that if he didn’t carry on Vassallo’s efforts at revitalization then no one would. Pollica, which is both a village and the name of the larger administrative community, is made up of rugged mountains and dramatic coastline, and it has a long-standing tradition of farming, viniculture, and seafaring: Vassallo had been known locally as “the fisherman mayor,” on account of his extra-political

profession. Its villages include Acciaroli, a seaside spot where Hemingway is said to have hung out in the nineteen-fifties, celebrated for its high percentage of centenarians, and Pioppi, where, beginning in the sixties, the American physiologist Ancel Keys researched the Mediterranean diet, publishing with his wife, Margaret Keys, a best-selling book, “How to Eat Well and Stay Well the Mediterranean Way,” that helped put olive oil firmly on the American dinner table. But, as Pisani points out, this latter-day acknowledgment of his region’s salutary properties has ancient precursors: two and a half millennia ago, Cilento was part of Magna Graecia, with the philosopher Parmenides theorizing the balance between humans and nature in Elea, a Greek settlement ten miles down the coast.

Pisani, who is fifty, lives with his family in Cannicchio, the hillside hamlet in which he grew up; but he could be called “the consultant mayor,” having left the region after university to work in business administration in [Naples](#) and [Rome](#). Although proud of Pollica’s reputation for super-agers, Pisani is focussed on the younger generations. “For me, it is most important to say to the youth, ‘Yes, go abroad, get your experience, and return to Pollica, because we need innovation,’ ” he said. He has established the Angelo Vassallo Center for Mediterranean Diet Studies, where, in a thirteenth-century castle, Sara Roversi, a faculty member at the University of Bologna and the founder of the nonprofit Future Food Institute, heads the Paideia Campus, teaching integral ecology and heritage know-how to high-school students, and also hosting visitors from the food industry. Of Pisani and his commitment to Cilento, Roversi said, “He’s like a priest—a person who has decided to dedicate his life to this.”

From Pisani’s perspective, the Mediterranean diet is about far more than comestibles. “Many people have said, ‘You can choose the right diet, so you live long and well’—it’s not true,” he said. “If you want to live long and well, you decide to live in a place where the environment and humans have identified the right equilibrium.” The Mediterranean diet might better be thought of as an entire system: the maintenance of biodiversity through regenerative farming; the transmission of cultural knowledge, including cooking; the stewardship of the sea—this was the first region in Italy to start rewarding fishermen for salvaging plastic from the waves, rather than fining them for dumping it harborside—and the tradition of conviviality. Last month, more than six hundred people ate lunch together on trestle tables that

snaked through the cobbled streets of Acciaroli, to celebrate fifteen years since [Unesco](#) designated the Mediterranean diet part of Italy's intangible cultural heritage. Among Pisani's innovations is a municipal mountaintop vineyard. "Why does the municipality produce wine? Because the mayor is crazy?" Pisani said. "The mayor is crazy—it's true. But we do it to analyze the approach to produce a good wine and renew the soil, and create a new opportunity for the young."

Earlier this month, Pisani and Roversi were at the [United Nations](#), for the declaration of November 16th as International Mediterranean Diet Day, as well as to promote Pollica, not so much as a destination for tourism—mention to Pisani the overly Instagrammed Amalfi Coast, Cilento's neighbor to the north, and he makes a face as if he had swigged a mouthful of corked Fiano—but as a model for the harmonious balance between a population and its locale. A hoped-for mayor-to-mayor-elect convivium with [Zohran Mamdani](#) wasn't possible—next time—but Pisani and Roversi did manage to dine at Flora, a restaurant in Park Slope that is run by transplants from Cilento, where they ate linguine and broccoli rabe with colatura di alici di menaica, a condiment made from anchovies. Pisani's message to the city, and to the United Nations, is that the Pollica approach can be applied anywhere, even in regions where the water is less than crystalline and the government doesn't have its own vineyard. "We are convinced that the resources of the planet are not in the big city but in the marginal areas," Pisani said. "Pollica is really the future of humanity." ♦

Nine Lives Dept.

Kumail Nanjiani Lets It Out of the Bag

The comedian gets vulnerable in “Night Thoughts,” his first standup special in twelve years. But the real star of the show might be his elderly cat.

By Jane Bua

December 15, 2025



First, a moment of silence. The beloved cat of the actor-comedian [Kumail Nanjiani](#) died three months ago. Her name was Bagel. She was seventeen.

“That’s the saddest I’ve ever been in my whole life,” Nanjiani said one recent evening, his eyes dewy. He was sitting in a large wooden cubby at a Lower East Side cat café called Meow Parlour. Felines roamed the room. Keeping Nanjiani company was a tortoiseshell kitty named Honeybee. A golden stripe sloped down her nose. “Oh, my God, look how pretty that is,” he marvelled.

Nanjiani, who had on a navy-blue shirt and jeans, was in town to talk about his new standup special, “Night Thoughts,” on Hulu. His first in twelve years, it veers through musings on anxiety, concerts, drugs, and Bagel. “I

hadn't missed standup, but I missed being good at it," he said. "That was the feeling I didn't like. And I thought, Let me see if this is still something I enjoy." It was.

He kept busy in the interim. Since releasing the special "Beta Male," in 2013, he has played a coder on HBO's "Silicon Valley," a Christmas-obsessed influencer on "Only Murders in the Building," and himself in "[The Big Sick](#)." He even had a run as Abraham Lincoln in [Cole Escola](#)'s play "Oh, Mary!" Nanjiani, who is forty-seven, described that as "a joyful and exhausting experience." The drag queen Jinkx Monsoon, who co-starred as the cabaret-loving Mary Todd, said, "Kumail has the energy of the smartest child you know, and the sense of humor of the dumbest adult you know." She added, "His masculinity doesn't need to be proved."

Nanjiani spent a chunk of time in the late twenty-tens bulking up for the role of Kingo—a million-year-old superhero-slash-Bollywood actor—in the 2021 Marvel film "[Eternals](#)," directed by [Chloé Zhao](#). His physical revamp gripped the world. "Another beloved schlub disappeared," a *Times* reporter lamented.

"People thought *I* had changed," Nanjiani said, exasperated. "But I'm the exact same person." (Scripture for any nerd who gets hot.) The beta had become an alpha.

"Beta Male" covered animals, too. ("Most birthdays in Pakistan, a monkey shows up," Nanjiani says, in a hoodie. Beat. "The fact that you just accepted that is racist.") But the jokes largely stayed on the surface. "That special was the greatest hits of the first twelve years of me doing comedy," he said. With "Night Thoughts," he digs deeper. After years of therapy, he explained, "I was, like, 'O.K., what are all the things that are hard for me to talk about?' One of them was my cat being sick." Bagel takes up about ten minutes of the hour-long special. "That material was genuinely difficult for me to do every time," he said. It has inspired his latest goal: doing a dramatic play. "I want to have real emotions in front of a crowd," he said. ("I could see him as Henry the Fifth," Monsoon said.) A tuxedo cat padded over—named Downy, after the fabric softener.

Nanjiani and his wife, the writer Emily V. Gordon, have recently adopted a kitten named Biscuit. It's been an adjustment. "Bagel was always a dignified cat, and this cat has no dignity," he said. "It's a bit of a dumbass." Honeybee, bored or offended, walked away.

On his way out, Nanjiani noted a tiny white kitten; an attendant said that she was up for adoption and that her name was Bridget. "I wish I lived here," Nanjiani said. All for the best, though: "I don't like human names for animals. I find it unsettling." He pointed to a mature brindle. "Who's this big guy?"

"That's Joy," the attendant responded.

"I just got a five-month-old tabby," Nanjiani said, whipping out his phone. "Can I show you a picture?" ♦

Reporting & Essays

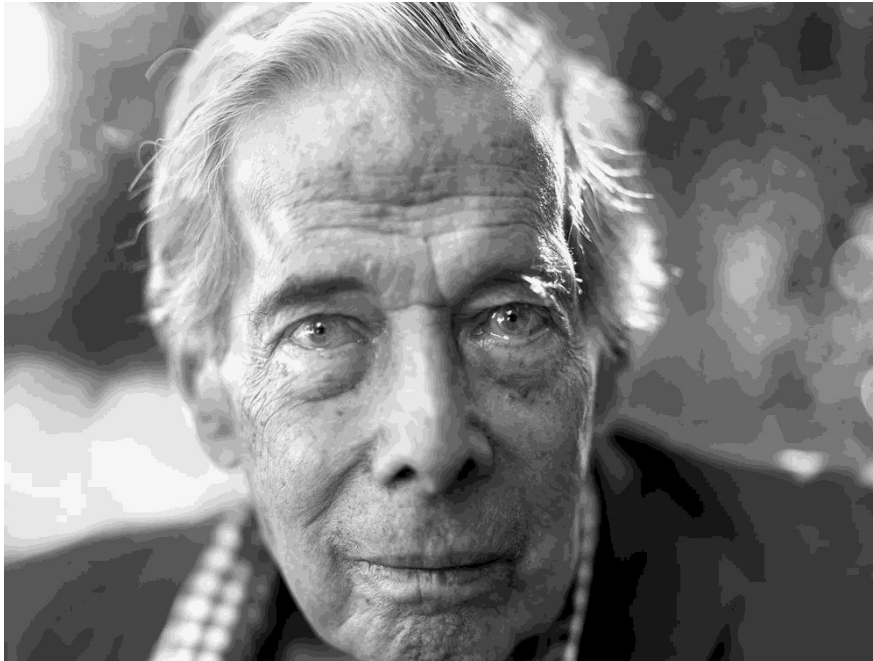
- [Becoming a Centenarian](#)

Becoming a Centenarian

Like The New Yorker, I was born in 1925. Somewhat to my surprise, I decided to keep a journal of my hundredth year.

By Calvin Tomkins

December 15, 2025



Old age is no joke, but it can feel like one. You look everywhere for your glasses, until your wife points out that you're wearing them. I turn a hundred this year. People act as though this is an achievement, and I suppose it is, sort of. Nobody in my family has lived this long, and I've been lucky. I'm still in pretty good health, no wasting diseases or Alzheimer's, and friends and strangers comment on how young I look, which cues me to cite the three ages of man: Youth, Maturity, and You Look Great. On the other hand, I've lost so many useful abilities that my wife, Dodie, and I have taken to calling me *Feebleman*. Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's *Feebleman*! Dodie doesn't want me to know how old she is, but she's nearly three decades younger than I am, and I become more dependent on her every day.

If I make it to a hundred (my birthday is December 17th), I'll be what is called a centenarian. More and more people are breaking the two-digit ceiling these days, prompting talk in medical circles about much longer life spans. I believe the record so far is held by [Jeanne Calment](#), a Frenchwoman who was born in 1875 and died in 1997, at a hundred and twenty-two, although there is some debate about the validity of her age. When Calment was ninety, a widow with no heirs, she sold her apartment in Arles to a local *notaire*, with the written agreement that she could continue to live there, by herself, until she died, and he would pay the taxes and give her a monthly stipend of twenty-five hundred francs. Calment was still going strong when the *notaire* died, in 1995, and his children paid the taxes and the stipend until her death, two years later. As Calment put it, "In life, one sometimes makes bad deals."

Somewhat to my surprise, I decided to keep a journal of my hundredth year. I've started journals before, at various points in my life, but the urge never lasted more than a few months. This time, I have a motive. Since [1958](#), I have been writing for *The New Yorker*, which, like me, was born in [1925](#). It recently became clear that interviewing dozens of people, gathering mountains of material, and keeping it all in my head has become increasingly difficult, what with my porous memory and failing eyesight. So why not just accept the inevitable and enjoy a year or two of leisure? I've tried that, and no thanks. Boredom in excelsis. Hence the journal. Not every day, but when an event, experience, person, or thought catches my attention enough to overcome my laziness.

February 15th

I'm starting a month and a half in, because the journal idea didn't come to me until yesterday. January was a preview of the next four years, which may well end up being the worst in American history. [Donald Trump](#) trumpeted his second coming with an avalanche of executive orders that sowed chaos and prepared the way for a government of, by, and for the billionaires. His choices for the Cabinet and other top positions have been comic, or insulting, or both. Trump put [Elon Musk](#), the world's richest man, in charge of the brand-new [Department of Government Efficiency](#) (*DOGE*). Thousands of government employees have already been fired, and many more will join them. I'm not going to spend much energy groaning about

Trumpery in these pages. Plenty of capable people do that every day, and I don't have the time.

February 19th

What we've learned in the past weeks is that, yes, we can carry on with our lives during the Trump catastrophe. Hours go by, sometimes whole days, when his gloating presence doesn't enter my mind. Maybe I'll forget his name, as I'm constantly doing with friends, family members, and everybody else, living or dead—not permanently, but again and again. This began a few years ago. I forget names all the time—sometimes, when I'm in the middle of talking to or about a person, their name will suddenly go elsewhere. It's embarrassing, but, at ninety-nine, what isn't? I recently revisited a journal that I kept for a while in 2011 and 2012, and came across this entry: "Last week on the Madison Avenue bus, a woman stood up and offered me her seat. I thought she was getting off, but she didn't. It startled me. Still so few indications of age, as I turn eighty-six." I didn't really start to *feel* old until a couple of years ago, and even now there are periods when the aches and pains seem to vanish. The yoga-based stretching exercises I do twice a day seem to have kept sciatica and other miseries at bay. I hate the short-term memory losses and the increasing unsteadiness with which I totter through the world, but I'm still a long way from what [Keats](#) described as being "half in love with easeful Death."

February 21st

Twice in the past week, someone told me I should get a dog. Is this a coincidence, or a signal? Dodie and I both had dogs before we married, but not since. Talking about it experimentally last night, Dodie said the only kind she would consider is an Italian greyhound. She likes her animals to be thin. For me, it would be a black Labrador retriever. [When I was growing up](#), in West Orange, New Jersey, we had a series of black Labs, and the most memorable of them was Loki, named for the Norse god of mischief. Loki's exuberance led him to run away, which he did fairly often. We'd get a call from somebody (our telephone number was attached to his collar), and my father would go out in the car and pick him up. He once had a dream about this. In the dream, Loki came back on his own from a three-day adventure,

and my father said to him, very sternly, “Loki, where have you been?” Loki said, “I’ve been to Montclair.”

My father loved dogs, and so did I. Before the Labs, we had two collies, an English setter, a French bulldog, a Boston bull, and a raccoon named Pete, whom Dad brought back from a fishing trip in the Adirondacks. (A forest ranger there had found three starving raccoon cubs with no mother; he offered them for adoption to everyone he met, and Dad took one.) Pete stayed with us for two years, living with the collies in their outdoor kennel and going on bike rides with my older brother, Frederick, and me. We’d take turns letting him ride on our shoulders. Our mother never got used to Pete, and when he nipped one of her friends at an outdoor tea party, his welcome expired. Dad put him in the car, drove for two hours, and released him in the Catskills. Two days later, he was back. Dad then chauffeured him to the Adirondacks. This time, he didn’t return. When I was very young, our grandmother gave us two Persian cats. My mother disliked cats, and she wouldn’t let them in the house. They lived in the kennel with the collies and Pete.

I once wrote a children’s book about an overly friendly mixed-breed dog named Ralph, and a haughty Siamese cat named Lavinia, who live in a house with two children and their parents. Ralph is determined to teach Lavinia how to laugh—cats, as you may know, have no sense of humor—and, in the end, he succeeds. The last scene has Ralph demolishing a dinner party by skidding around on the just-polished wood floor, upsetting tables and scattering drinks, and when it’s over and Ralph has been banished to the basement, Lavinia is discovered under a chair, lying on her back and shaking with silent laughter.



February 22nd

Yesterday's entry reminded me of something that Trippie, my first-born child, said when she was three years old. (Her name is Anne; Trippie came from her love of car trips.) Our dog then, a black-and-brown dachshund named Waldi, had stopped eating, and we were taking him to the vet. He was on her lap, in the front seat of the car, and I could see she was really worried about him. I said, "Trip, he's going to be fine. You know how, when you get sick, we take you to the doctor and he gives you something that makes you well? It's just like that." Trippie was quiet for a while, and then she said, in the sweetly thoughtful voice that still delights me today, "Dad, is Waldi's doctor a dog?"

February 26th

The New Yorker celebrated its hundredth birthday last night, with a party for four hundred people at a club downtown. [The magazine's first issue](#) came out on February 21, 1925, ten months before I did. Dodie and I rarely go to big, deafening social events, but we went to this one. [David Remnick](#), the magazine's editor, met us at the entrance with enveloping hugs that made us feel he was touched by our being there. We stayed for half an hour, saw [Bruce Diones](#), [Chip McGrath](#), [Calvin \(Bud\) Trillin](#), [Cressida Leyshon](#) (my editor), and lots of other friends, whose names skittered away from me. On

the way out, we bucked an incoming tide of celebrants who were just arriving. *The New Yorker*, which started out as what [Harold Ross](#), its founding editor, called a “comic weekly,” has held and still holds a unique place in this country’s cultural history.

We subscribed to *The New Yorker* when I was growing up, and I probably began looking at the cartoons when I was nine or ten. My father read every issue. He sometimes complained that the articles were too long. I remember him saying that he’d get to the end of a very long piece only to find that it was the first of five parts. By the time I joined the staff, in 1960, after three years of writing for *Newsweek* and contributing short humor pieces, called Casuals, to *The New Yorker*, the long fact pieces were, at least sometimes, getting shorter—ten or twelve thousand words instead of fifteen or twenty thousand. My first Profile, in 1962, was about a Swiss artist named [Jean Tinguely](#), who made large sculptural machines with moving parts. I had been fascinated by his “Homage to New York,” from 1960, which included bicycle wheels, small motors, radios, a piano, automobile parts, a huge balloon that inflated and then burst, and many other elements from the junk yard. The sole purpose of this ridiculous monolith, which it largely achieved, was to destroy itself in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. I knew very little about art then, and Tinguely’s irreverent approach, which made ample room for humor, set me on a course of writing mainly (but not exclusively) about contemporary art and artists.

March 8th

Juan Hamilton, who attached himself to [Georgia O’Keeffe](#) when he was twenty-seven and she was eighty-five, died last month, at his home in Santa Fe. He had started working for O’Keeffe in 1973, a week before I went out to New Mexico to spend a few days interviewing her. After lunch one day, O’Keeffe asked Hamilton to drive us, in her [Volkswagen minibus](#), from her house at Ghost Ranch, north of Santa Fe, to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, so she could see the purple asters in bloom there. I have a vivid memory of O’Keeffe, in a long white dress, bouncing around imperturbably in the back seat as Hamilton navigated the barely visible dirt roads. She talked amicably with the Benedictine monks at the monastery while we were there, and on the way back she said it would be very easy for her to convert

someone to Catholicism. “It has great appeal,” she said. “Not for me, of course—but I can see the appeal.”

There was a lot of speculation about O’Keeffe’s relationship with Hamilton, but to me it seemed easy and natural. He was with her until she died, in 1986, and his gently joking presence certainly made her last years more pleasant. She left him most of the paintings that had not been promised elsewhere, and that led to bitter lawsuits and accusations of “undue influence.” But Hamilton and O’Keeffe’s relatives agreed to a settlement in the end.

Another memory: The three of us, O’Keeffe, Hamilton, and I, are in the kitchen and [she is cooking dinner](#)—a chicken and five different kinds of squash from her garden. (It’s her regular cook’s night off.) Something is wrong with the stove. O’Keeffe kneels down and peers into the gas oven, and suddenly there’s a flash and a loud explosion. O’Keeffe stands up, shakily. Both her eyelids are scorched. “Well, it seems like we’re not having chicken,” she says. Juan and I exchange astonished glances, but nobody says another word.

My Profile of O’Keeffe was published in the March 4, 1974, issue, and a month later she wrote me a letter. She had something to ask me, she said. Would I come back to New Mexico so she could ask it in person? Of course, I said yes. There was no monograph on her work at that time, and I assumed that she would ask me to write one. I was wrong. What she wanted was for me to look at notes she had been writing about her paintings. O’Keeffe had decided to publish them, but her younger sister Claudia had told her they were ungrammatical and should not be published. The notes were vintage O’Keeffe—brief, vivid, enlightening, and, yes, often ungrammatical, but brilliantly so. I told her they should absolutely be published. She asked me how to go about that. I offered to call my agent, and she said, Yes, please do. I made the call from her living room. Don Congdon, my agent at the time, could barely contain his excitement. Within a week, he had negotiated a contract with the Viking Press, and “Georgia O’Keeffe,” the first illustrated book on her work, came out in 1976 and became a best-seller. So much for good grammar.

March 12th

These notes tend to deal with the past. Here's one in the present. This morning, when I was brushing my teeth, I saw one of those furry, long-legged insects heading toward me on the bathroom floor. I raised a leg and tried to step on it but missed. The bug veered off in another direction and I followed it, stamping and missing until I lost my balance and fell, heavily. Nothing was broken, but I felt humiliated, defeated by a helpless creature who wished me no harm, and that made me laugh. Maybe I'll write a series of stories about Feebleman and Milly the Millipede—a book—and call it "The Adventures of Feebleman."

March 13th

Yesterday morning, Dodie and I went to the Metropolitan Museum to see the exhibition of work by [Caspar David Friedrich](#), whose uncanny ability to paint atmospheric landscapes, with or without figures in them, makes you feel you are there. Until six months ago, I could walk the ten blocks from our apartment to the museum, but now we go by [Uber](#), and I view the art from a wheelchair. Unhappily, I have found that looking at pictures from a wheelchair, with your eyes about two feet below where they would be if you were standing, has irreparable defects—in this case, reflections of the gallery's overhead lights, which blotted out the paintings. I could remedy the problem by standing up, but that required pushing away the wheelchair's footrests, and it made me feel so unsteady that I tried it only twice. I sometimes think my main complaint about old age is the way it interferes with looking at art and listening to music. Although the remote control for my hearing aids has a setting for music, it never really works. All music sounds so off-key to my ears that it's just noise. An audiologist once admitted to me that "hearing aids and music are not friends."

March 16th

When we invite people to dinner at our apartment, we ask them to come at seven and all but suggest that they leave by nine. One of us will joke that this is the time I start to drool, but the real reason is that from nine on I can no longer take part in a conversation. It happens to me quite suddenly. I just drop out and sit there, smiling like an imbecile. The drooling comes later, when I'm asleep. I wake up and find that one side of the pillow is soaking wet. Old age is so embarrassing.

Years ago, Michael Sonnabend, a [Dante](#) scholar who married the art dealer [Ileana Castelli](#) (whose first husband was the legendary [Leo Castelli](#)) when they were both well along in years, made me laugh by saying, as he left a party, that he had to go home and change his diaper. Now the adult version comes in packets of forty, and I use three a day.

March 29th

Much attention these days is paid to the benefits and the dangers of [artificial intelligence](#) (A.I.), but hardly any is paid to what I call artificial stupidity (A.S.). Donald Trump has made remarkably effective use of A.S. Even Trump can't possibly believe that he can make Canada our fifty-first state. The whole idea is too absurd to take seriously, but Trump's repeated references to it add to the chaos and uncertainty that shroud his more sordid activities, such as attacks on the rule of law.

Artificial stupidity means deciding to believe something that has no basis in fact, logic, or common sense. When I started using the phrase, a year ago, it was sort of a joke, but the breakdown of trust in our government and our social institutions which paved the way to Trump's second term has made it all too serious.



April 6th

It seems that I am legally blind. This comes as a surprise. Last year, Murk Heinemann, our longtime ophthalmologist and friend, showed me on my annual visit a photograph that revealed some macular degeneration in my right eye; with luck it might not get any bigger, he said, and he prescribed a stronger lens for the other eye. I've always felt that my eyes were functioning more or less normally, given their age. Much of the time, I don't wear my distance glasses—the world is a little blurry, but I don't bump into things. Since the [pandemic](#), Dodie and I have been spending more time at our place in Rhode Island. I went to the local eye clinic there a while ago, because I was having trouble reading small print, and the optometrist I saw must have passed the results on to the Rhode Island Department of Human Services. At any rate, a very pleasant young woman came to the house to break the news that I was legally blind, and that the town we live in had amenities to offer, including a tax break.

Here's what I got, without even asking: 1. A red-and-white walking stick, whose colors are the international signal for a legally blind and deaf person. 2. A cube clock with a large yellow button that, when pressed, elicits a slightly impatient male voice announcing the time. Another button activates an alarm, which can be the sound of a bell, a horn, a cuckoo, a beeping, or a two-tone chime. 3. A talking book reader, with someone reading aloud; this one is the "property of the U.S. government" and must be returned if I don't want to use it, or die, or something. 4. Twelve Pilot Bravo Bold Point Marker Pens. 5. A talking alarm clock that you wear on a chain around your neck. 6. Three copies of a letter certifying that I am permanently legally blind, to be used when applying for a handicapped-parking certificate or a tax adjustment. It was all somewhat overwhelming. So far, I've put away the cane, which was heavier than the one I'd been using, and tried writing with a Bold Point Marker Pen, which left a smudge on my index finger that I'm still trying to scrub off. I plan to look into the tax break. (I did, and I didn't qualify.) The rest of my booty lies in a corner, untouched. New stuff is daunting to old guys, especially when the instructions are in small print.

April 7th

In my long life, I can't say, as Édith Piaf does in one of her defiant chansons, that I have no regrets. Most of mine center on my four children, whom I put through my three divorces and several periods when they had less fathering

than they deserved. They all made it to adulthood, marriage, children of their own, and interesting careers, and when we see each other now it's pure pleasure. Trippie, Susan, and Spencer, the three kids from my first marriage, love to reminisce about the annual ski trips we took, during spring break, to Sugarbush, Stratton, Stowe, and other Vermont mountains, trips that we all remember as among the happiest times in our lives. Sarah, from my third marriage, missed out on the skiing, but I probably spent more time with her when she was growing up. I used to take her to Central Park on the back of my bike. One day, I stopped to chat with a friend from *The New Yorker*. I was standing beside the bike, and suddenly it started to fall away from me. I yelled, "Oh, shit," made a frantic lunge, and just managed to keep bike and two-year-old daughter from a bad fall, while Sarah chanted happily, "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." My *New Yorker* friend couldn't stop laughing.

Sarah became a lawyer. Trippie taught high-school chemistry until six years ago, when she retired. (Think of that!) Susan put together a personal-service practice that included cooking, secretarial work, and help with tax returns. Spencer, the only one who lives in New York, is a private art dealer who can earn on a good day more than I can in a year. They all make me feel I'm a splendid father, and I enjoy believing them. Years ago, on one of our ski trips, we decided to take a lesson together. Trippie and Spencer were assigned to a more advanced group than Susan and I. The two of us stayed close for an hour, practicing our turns and laughing at our falls and near-falls, and toward the end of the lesson the instructor, a young woman who was not much older than Susan, said, "What's the relationship between you two?" Sue said, with a quiet pride that I'll never forget, "He's my dad." In my book, the good luck far outweighs the regrets.

April 16th

Most nights, Dodie and I have dinner at home. We used to go to art-world dinner parties and to restaurants we liked, but my hearing ability now vanishes if people around me are talking, so we tend to stay home. Neither of us really knows how to cook. The menu is limited: rotisserie chicken from FreshDirect, salads of all kinds, broiled salmon, linguine with my pesto sauce, omelettes—that's pretty much it. Dodie makes the salads, which can include three or four different lettuces, plus arugula, kale, and spinach, and I do the omelettes. I wish I could say I learned how to make an omelette from

[Julia Child](#), whom I profiled in 1974, but I actually learned much earlier, when my first wife and I spent a weekend with an uncle of mine, who decreed that each of us would make a different dish for dinner, and I made omelettes using a recipe in his copy of “Joy of Cooking.”

Two decades later, I watched Julia on TV making an omelette on an electric hot plate, nursing it to fold over just by manipulating the pan as she talked. On the spot, I joined the millions of people whom she had already bewitched. She was so warm, and so funny. There was a time when some viewers complained about her using wine in her recipes, and Julia liked to tease them. “Now I’ll add a half teaspoon of white wine,” she would say in her plummy voice as she poured copiously from the bottle. “The children will love it.”

April 24th

Breakfast at our New York apartment with Gavin Brown, an artist in dealer’s clothing. He had a broken foot, and hobbled in on crutches. (I had misheard Dodie, as I often do these days, and thought we were expecting the artist Cy Gavin.) Gavin Brown has always been a uniquely contrary, anti-mainstream figure on the New York art scene, a British-born artist who became a dealer here and introduced [Elizabeth Peyton](#), [Rirkrit Tiravanija](#), [Peter Doig](#), [Chris Ofili](#), [Urs Fischer](#), and other young artists, most of whom eventually left his gallery for others that could offer them more money. (He also reintroduced [Alex Katz](#).) Brown is still an irreverent and unpredictable presence.

We talked about art, which, he said, “has come to a halt and gone somewhere else,” and then he asked how I would feel about his optioning “[Off the Wall](#),” my 1980 book on [Robert Rauschenberg](#), as the basis of a feature film. “Rauschenberg was the ultimate romantic, the embracer of mistakes,” he said. “It would be about how you get the spirit, the mystery, of art-making into film. I think it could be a great romantic story.” Gavin has never made a feature film; what he meant was that he would somehow find the money and put together a production team. We discussed this for a while, and agreed, amid much laughter, that “his people would call my people.” I tried to find out how he had broken his foot but got nowhere. “There are four screws in it,” he said.

April 29th

Paula Cooper was honored last night at the New Museum's gala dinner, which drew about six hundred art-worlders to Cipriani South Street, a huge place that is as far downtown as a restaurant can get. She had a bad cold, and she looked fragile, but also beautiful and wise. Her gallery was the first to open downtown, in 1968, in what was already being called SoHo, and the minimalist and conceptual artists she showed, many of whom she still shows, were the ones that other artists admired—Hans Haacke, Mark di Suvero, [Elizabeth Murray](#), [Robert Gober](#), Rudolf Stingel, [Jennifer Bartlett](#), [Bernd and Hilla Becher](#), [Christian Marclay](#), [Carl Andre](#), [Dan Flavin](#), [Sol LeWitt](#), [Donald Judd](#), and [Robert Ryman](#), among many others.

I can't remember when I first met Paula, but it must have been in the early seventies. Some years later, we found ourselves staying at the same Left Bank hotel in Paris, the Montalembert. We had dinner together there one night, and afterward, when we got into the elevator, I felt as though something was going to happen, but it didn't. We exchanged strangely awkward good nights when she got off at her floor, and I continued on to mine. (What Paula remembers of the evening is that "it was one of the few times I saw him when he was alone. He always had a woman guarding him.") About ten years after this, I introduced her to Jack Macrae, my publisher and my closest friend. His long marriage had broken up, Paula had been single for ages, and it struck me that they would like each other. It was my only try at matchmaking, and a complete success. They left together that night, got married a year later, and lived together very happily until Jack's death, two years ago.

May 5th

The New Yorker has been devoting more attention to its centennial year than I have to mine. Every issue dusts off a gem from the past. In the latest issue, [Anthony Lane](#) gives us a witty rundown on twelve books that various staffers have written on life at the magazine, including [James Thurber's](#) "[The Years with Ross](#)," from 1957, and [Gardner Botsford's](#) "[A Life of Privilege, Mostly](#)," from 2003. Lane, who reviewed movies for the magazine between 1993 and 2024, was the only *New Yorker* writer in that role who consistently made me laugh, and he does so frequently here. ("The entire stack could be crowned with the heading 'Fanfare for the Comma Men,' " he writes.) His piece also led me to wonder why, in all my years at the

magazine, I never wrote about it. The answer, I think, is that I've never been fully there. When I came on staff there were no empty offices, so I worked at home. Eventually, I got an office, but I kept on working at home. I came in only when a piece of mine was closing, to work with the editor and the [fact checker](#). That way, I got to know several editors and fact checkers quite well, but not many writers, and I didn't become part of the everyday life of the place. I felt more at home in the art world, which would become the main focus of my work.

In my early years at *The New Yorker*, the editor was [William Shawn](#), who had succeeded Harold Ross in 1952. Once a year, Shawn would knock on the door of my office—he had ways of knowing when I was there—with my new contract in his hand. He would apologize for disturbing me; Shawn was unshakably formal, and quite shy. I would sign the document on the spot, not even pretending to glance at it, and he would say, “Thank you, Mr. Tomkins,” and leave. When I had a new piece to submit, I would send it via office mail to Shawn, and wait. Usually, I'd hear nothing for several days, but sometimes the wait was longer. On one occasion, after waiting for nearly three weeks the suspense was so agonizing that I called him on the phone. “Oh, Mr. Tomkins, I've been trying to reach you,” he said, untruthfully. Nothing was wrong. He liked the piece—so why the delay? In spite of such mysteries, I felt, and still feel, that writing for *The New Yorker* is the best thing I could have done. I've had many editors. Each of them has improved my prose and my thinking, and the fact checkers have saved me from any number of embarrassing mistakes. Shawn edited quite a few writers himself, and I've heard two of them say it was a great experience, but he never edited me.

The only *New Yorker* person I saw regularly outside the office was [Roger Angell](#), a senior fiction editor for many years. In the nineteen-fifties, he and I both lived in Snedens Landing, a small community on the Hudson River, south of Nyack, and our children were roughly the same age. I was writing for *Newsweek* then. Roger urged me to try writing Casuals for *The New Yorker*, and when I did he edited the ones that were accepted—about half of them were not. His rejections could be biting. Roger did not believe in softening blows. In addition to being the smartest person in any room, he was highly competitive, and sometimes I felt that he enjoyed rejecting things. A number of staffers found him insufferable. “People write me off all

the time,” he once said to me, with the implication that it didn’t bother him a bit. It seemed a little unfair that this powerful editor and scion of *New Yorker* royalty (his mother, [Katharine White](#), helped Harold Ross shape the magazine, and served as its first fiction editor) was also a marvellous writer, whose pieces on [baseball](#), published in the magazine and collected in several books, are great reading for lifelong baseball fans and for people who have never been to a game.

Longer ago than I like to think, Roger and I and our wives went on a ski trip in Vermont. On the last day, as the sun was setting, the two of us decided to take one more run down the mountain. (The wives had already gone back to the lodge.) I finished before he did and, as we’d agreed, waited for him so we could ski to the lodge together. The wind had subsided, and there were long shadows on the snow. I noticed that the lift was still running, with nobody on it, and I couldn’t resist. I hustled over and got on a chair, and as it rose high above the hill I saw Roger below me. I waved and shouted, making motions urging him to get on the lift, but when he saw me he threw down his poles and, with both arms, consigned me to outer darkness.

I didn’t see him again until that evening, when the four of us met in the lodge’s dining room. There was no mention of what had happened, but, as we studied the menus, Roger said, reflectively, “I looked at myself in the mirror just now, when I was shaving, and I said, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the most ill-tempered of us all?’ ” We all laughed, including the girl who was taking our orders. Friendship with Roger was complicated but almost always worth the effort. He had brought me to *The New Yorker*, after all, and we stayed friends—at a slight distance—until he died, three years ago, when he was a hundred and one.

May 18th

We have moved back to our Rhode Island place, in what we call Newport but is really Middletown, one town over. Dodie grew up in Newport, where her family, the Kazanjians, had established an import business in 1882. Once an active port city, Newport is now a tourist haven for people who come to see the palatial summer houses of Astors, Vanderbilts, Wetmores, and other grandees of the [Gilded Age](#). Many of those families bought their Chinese porcelains and other status-building art objects from the John H. Kazanjian

& Co. store, on Bellevue Avenue. One of my own ancestors, whom I was named after, had a brief association with Cornelius Vanderbilt. Calvin Tomkins, my great-great-grandfather, ran barges up and down the Hudson River in the eighteen-thirties, when Vanderbilt's steamboats were ferrying passengers around the New York area. One day, so the story goes, Vanderbilt urged him to invest in railroads, as he was doing, and Great-Great-Grandfather Tomkins, in his wisdom, declined. "There's no money in railroads," he said. "I'm sticking to the river."



Newport has many attractions, one of which is the wound center at Newport Hospital. I'd had a rather bad fall that tore up the skin on the back of one leg—at my age, weak skin and blood-thinning drugs make me vulnerable to this kind of thing. Dodie's bandaging didn't stop the bleeding, so she called the hospital and was told to bring me to the emergency room. Hoping to avoid that, Dodie said that what I had was really just a scrape, "a wound," and the person she was talking to said, "Oh, a wound—then bring him to the wound center." Apparently, this is the hospital's best-kept secret. Half an hour later, I was in a reclining chair, and Dr. Rocco and Joe Fontenault, one of his assistants, were dressing my wound. What does the well-dressed wound wear these days? After a thorough cleansing, Joe applied a layer of white zinc cream, and then wrapped my leg, from foot to knee, in layers of adhesive bandage cloth, all without causing me the slightest pain. Dodie and

I came back twice a week for re-bandaging, and then, two months after the wound had healed, we did it all again after I leaned into a stone step and gashed my left shin. When the bandage came off this one, Dr. Rocco and his crew of assistants gathered to give us a friendly farewell and a blue elastic bracelet with “Wound Care Alumni” on it. I look forward with pleasure to my next injury.

May 21st

I can no longer read books, magazines, or newspapers. This happened quite suddenly, about a week ago, when I found myself struggling so hard to read an essay in *The New York Review of Books* that I stopped trying. There had been warnings, I’ll admit, but until that moment it had not occurred to me that something so essential could just go away. Dodie has made an appointment for next week with Dr. Collins, the Newport ophthalmologist, and we’ll see what else, if anything, can be done.

May 24th

Paul Moakley, who runs *The New Yorker’s* film-and-video department, wants to make a short documentary about me. I knew only vaguely that the magazine had such a department. It seems that it is more than ten years old, and one of its short films won an [Academy Award](#) in March. My first impulse was to say no, because I’m so bad at remembering names, but Moakley was easy to talk to, and he had read a lot of my pieces in the magazine, and Dodie said, “Of course you’ll do it.” The first interview, or session, or whatever it turns into, has been set for August.

May 26th

Since we started reading the *Times* online, five years ago, the paper has lost some of its implacable authority. Dodie reads the headlines to me at breakfast. We decide which stories we want to hear and she reads them aloud. (At lunch, we turn to fiction—[Jane Austen](#), [Vladimir Nabokov](#), [Ian McEwan](#).) The one feature we never skip is Maureen Dowd’s opinion column. “In Trump’s moral universe,” she wrote on May 24th, “the right thing to do is always the thing that makes him richer.”

May 28th

Today is Dodie's and my anniversary. We've been married for thirty-seven years. My son Spencer informed us, via e-mail, that if the marriage lasts three more years it will be longer than the three others combined.

May 29th

Dr. Collins had no good news for me. I now have macular degeneration in both eyes. The recent sharp decline in my ability to read was expectable, he says, and stronger eyeglass lenses will not help. All this would have been pretty crushing if I had not been visited, a week earlier, by Molly Faerber, another Samaritan from the league of the legally blind. Molly brought a bag of useful devices, including plastic measuring cups and spoons with the amounts written on them in large white letters; all kinds of protective gloves to prevent burns and cuts in the kitchen; and, best of all, a compact, uncomplicated magnifying device that sits on the page of a book or a magazine and makes every word readable. I liked it so much that I ended up buying one.

June 2nd

"What time is it?" Dodie murmured, as I came back to bed from the bathroom.

"A quarter to four," I said. And for the next half hour, lying in bed, I found myself mouthing the words to "Chattanooga Choo Choo"—all of them, from "You leave the Pennsylvania station 'bout a quarter to four" to "Chattanooga Choo Choo, won't you choo choo me home."

How on earth did I do that? I can barely remember the names of close friends, and I hadn't listened to that song in at least five decades. Memory is often absurd this way. I don't even like the song. Well, maybe I do, a little.

June 8th

Elon Musk's love affair with Donald Trump is [over](#). After leaving the government, Musk suggested that Trump should be impeached. Trump said he was "very disappointed" with Musk, and threatened to cancel his many government contracts. Tune in next week, or the week after, or not at all.

June 9th

Dodie said she was going to get more music in my life. I said no, my hearing aids are incompatible with music, but then I started to think about it. I always say no, Dodie tells me, and maybe she's right. Have I experimented enough with the music button on my remote? I really miss listening to music. Maybe this is why I constantly find myself hearing it in my head—all kinds of music, from "Chattanooga Choo Choo" to [Mozart's](#) overture to "The Magic Flute." I used to listen to that sublime piece over and over again, and when I came to the repeated phrase of three ascending notes I could rarely suppress tears. I was overcome by the joy of it, and by the miracle of all those musicians landing with such precision and grace on the right note at the same moment. There must be some way to get that back. I'll keep trying.

June 10th

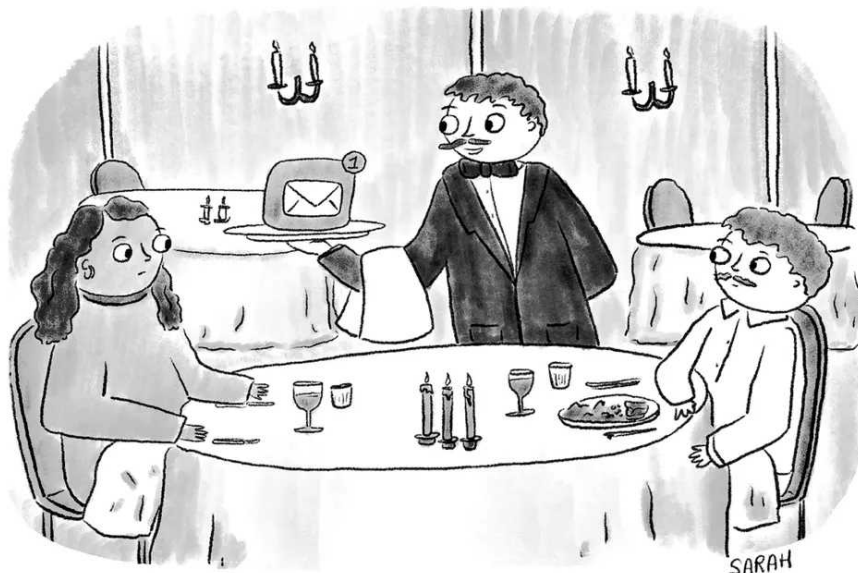
As if in answer to the last line in the above entry, today's *Times* ran an ad for Horizon IX, a "revolutionary" new hearing aid that is "smaller than a coffee bean" and offers a staggering increase in hearing ability. Dodie was not impressed. She said ads like this appear all the time. She sent it to Sara Bozsik, our audiologist, who confirmed her doubts—my hearing loss is way beyond any such device.

The paraphernalia of old age piles up. Molly Faerber, the angel of legal blindness, visited us again last week and left still more devices, including another magnifier to try out. She also had plastic pill boxes for each day of the week and a computer keyboard with keys about twice as large as the usual ones—it sits on top of the computer, and when I tried to use it the computer went wild, spinning off lines of question marks before I could induce it to stop. I think we'll pass on that one.

June 11th

Do I think about death? Yes, of course. I think about it fairly often, but without emotion. The question was settled for me years ago, when I realized that I don't believe in any sort of afterlife. What I believe is that all of us—humans, animals, birds, plants, trees, and so forth—are part of the same natural world, and that death is as essential as life. This, for me, has always been a calming thought.

A great many humans believe in higher beings, single or multiple, and their belief has inspired miracles of thought and art, as well as senseless wars and cruelties. I respect the believers, but I don't envy them. As for my living so long, I am grateful for that, and ready to accept death whenever it shows up.



June 16th

The artists Cy Gavin and Alex Da Corte spent three days with us in Rhode Island. Cy is designing an installation at what used to be called the International Yacht Restoration School, for Dodie's not-for-profit enterprise, Art&Newport, which she started, in 2017, to bring international contemporary art—and artists—to Newport. Cy's new works are rarely like anything he's done before. We had no idea what he would come up with this time, and neither did he. Alex, whose work is conceptual, is developing a series of lecture-performances at the Metropolitan Museum on the subject of art and glass. His January lecture is on [Duchamp](#). "I am speaking as though I am him, in spirit," Alex said. When we discussed it at dinner last night, I realized how little I remember about the "Large Glass," Duchamp's most complex work. (Its official name is "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even.") Duchamp spent years creating it, and then, when sloppy crating caused it to shatter in transit after an appearance at the Brooklyn Museum, he restored it, shard by shard, and told friends that he liked it better with the cracks. I published a [biography of Duchamp](#) in 1996. I'd like

to reread it before Alex's lecture, but I can't—using the new magnifier, it would take me a month or more. Countless books on Duchamp have been published since mine came out, but no biographies in English. This makes me feel I still own the man—even though I've forgotten more about him than most people ever knew.

As one of the last Duchampians who actually knew Duchamp, I am often asked, by artists and non-artists, what he was like. It's a hard question to answer. When Mary Reynolds, whom Duchamp had lived with, off and on, in the nineteen-thirties and forties, was dying, from cancer, in 1950, she told her friend Elizabeth Hume that she could no longer stand being with people. "Am I people?" Hume asked, and Mary said, with a rueful laugh, "Yes, even you, too. Marcel is the only person I ever met who was not people. He could be in a room with me and I still felt alone." It was a strange tribute, one that reflected her respect for the solitude and the absolute freedom that Duchamp needed to do his work. Mary had chosen to live in Paris, and Duchamp had moved to New York and become an American citizen. When he learned that she was dying, he went to Paris and stayed with her during the last ten days of her life.

June 24th

Yesterday, quite suddenly, my eyesight got even worse. I had been making corrections in the June 16th entry. I got up to go to the bathroom, and when I came back I could barely see the words on the page or the keys on the computer. What had happened? I lay down on the bed, with a vague hope that if I closed my eyes for a while things would clear up, but they didn't. Shaken, I wondered if I was going really blind, not just legally. But away from the desk everything seemed normal. I could see the house next to ours in as much detail as usual, and the trees around it, and across the river to the houses there. The objects on my desk were blurry, though, and using the computer had become almost impossible. Something had definitely happened that morning. Or had it?

Reading a book or a magazine was already impossible for me without a magnifier—why should using the computer be any different? The solution stared me in the face. I would have to start dictating, something I had never considered before. Dodie, when I broached this to her, said, "Of course.

We'll do it together." She has to do a piece for *Vogue* first, and open the Cy Gavin exhibition, so it will be a while before we can start—what? My career as a dictator.

July 2nd

I've had two very bad days, feeling that my whole world was collapsing at breakneck speed. It wasn't, of course. What's happened is neither sudden nor surprising. Dodie and I discussed this at breakfast. I was raving about how I refused to make her give up two hours every morning to take dictation, and she said nothing would give her more pleasure. What we're doing right now is exploring the process. She's sitting at my desk with me, taking down what I say, deleting it so I can say something better. It's going to be a while before this becomes even marginally doable, but I'm starting to feel a little calmer. "So am I," Dodie says.

I'm exhausted, but it's a start.

July 17th

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:

In my junior year of college, I took a course on [Shakespeare's](#) sonnets—just the sonnets. The professor condemned us to read all hundred and fifty-four of them, memorize as many as we could, and be tested on what we remembered. That sounded impossible. How could we remember even five of them? To our great surprise, however, almost all of us did fairly well on the first test. And although today I can't quote a single entire sonnet, snatches from several of them, such as the opening lines of Sonnet 30, quoted above, have stayed with me.

It fascinates me that these days, with my short-term memory in tatters, I can remember anything at all. What is it about those four lines that makes them stay in my head, and how does that relate to my faultless memory of every word in "Chattanooga Choo Choo," which I never tried or wanted to memorize? Vladimir Nabokov's "[Speak, Memory](#)," which Dodie is currently

reading aloud to me, takes us deep into such questions. Nabokov's command of words is Shakespearean as he describes the earliest experience he can remember. It occurred in the park of his wealthy family's country estate on an August day in 1903, when he was four years old. He was walking with his mother, a "twenty-seven-year-old being in soft white and pink," and his father, who was dressed in the colorful uniform of a Russian Horse Guard officer, which he had pulled out of storage to amuse the others. Walking between them, he writes, "I see my diminutive self as celebrating . . . the birth of sentient life." We can't all share Nabokov's elevated consciousness of himself and his world, but I like to think there is a link between the excitement of his discovery and my remembering Shakespeare's lines. My memory of them is not infallible. I tend to forget the word "sessions" in Sonnet 30. I struggle with "When to the . . ." To the what? And then, out of nowhere, "sessions" floats down, with the sibilance of its neighbors "sweet" and "silent." Telling this to Dodie, I am for some reason close to tears, and so is she.

July 22nd

The last entry was our first sustained attempt at dictation. Dodie put what I came up with into magnified type (three hundred per cent) that I could read, and then I spent the next four days moving sentences around, adding new words and deleting others, repunctuating everywhere, and rethinking what it was I wanted to say and how to say it. It was hard work, exhausting at times, and I kept going with the aid of brief naps. But all that was not much different from my lifelong writing process. For many years, it had seemed to me that the physical act of typing was essential to the flow of words that came to me in short bursts, but the ideas flowed about as well with Dodie typing.

These days, sitting at my desk on the second floor of our Rhode Island cottage, I spend a lot of time looking out the window at the new house next door. It's a modernistic, two-story structure with an Olympic-size swimming pool. The odd thing is that since it was finished, a couple of years ago, nobody seems to live there. Once in a while, we see a few young people swimming in the pool or lying on one of the many chaise longues; on rare occasions, always holidays, they stay overnight and leave the next day, but for months at a time the house is empty. We've never met the owners.

We did know and like the people who used to live next door, Dottie and Ed Sheffield. They were friendly, and older than we were. Every year, Dottie, who belonged to the Newport Garden Club, gave Dodie ginger plants from her garden, to be used as a ground cover. And every summer they gave a dinner party for their many friends. After an hour of cocktails, dinner began with a cup of cold vichyssoise, served while we were still standing. Dottie and Ed stopped coming a few years back, and both of them died soon afterward. Their son Win came occasionally, but in 2022 we heard that he and his brother had sold the house. We were living full time in Rhode Island then, because of the pandemic. In November, we went down to New York for a few days, during which time I had a pacemaker installed. (My heartbeat is normal, but subject to fibrillations.) The day we left, a monstrous demolition vehicle appeared on the lawn next door, and when we came back the Sheffield's' house, Daisyfields, had vanished without a trace.

August 14th

I am flat on my back, on the floor of my bathroom. The top to my wooden shaving bowl dropped to the floor, and as I squatted to retrieve it I heard Dodie call out from the next room, "Don't bend down! I'll pick it up." But I was already bending down and losing my balance. Dodie got there in time to prevent my head from hitting the sink as I fell, but I landed hard on my back and my rump.

Falls are the scourge of old age. I've had four or five during the past two years, and it was pure luck that kept me from serious injury. Our E.N.T. doctor and dear friend, Vijay Anand, once misjudged the distance between himself and the bed he was sitting down on, and he spent the next year and a half in the intensive-care unit of the hospital. At first, I thought I'd been lucky again, but I found that, even with Dodie's help, I was unable to get myself up from the floor. She called her brother John, who lives nearby. He came over, and, for what seemed like an hour, the three of us struggled to turn me over so I could be kneeling. I was sure that I would be able to get up from a kneeling position, but I was wrong. Never in my life had I felt so helpless. I finally let Dodie call 911. Five minutes later, a pair of strapping young men arrived from the Middletown Fire Department. Each put an arm under a shoulder, and one, two, three, I was standing. It turns out that in our

town older people who can't get up when they fall can call 911 for a "lift assist."

Once again, I'd escaped without major injuries, or so I thought. I was wrong about that, too. For the past two weeks, my legs have been so shaky that even a brief walk leaves me panting and in need of rest. I've been back to the wound center to have Dr. Rocco re-bandage the torn skin on my right arm, which had refused to stop bleeding. Something tells me that I'll never be as spry as I was two weeks ago.

August 15th

The erratic motion of a yellow butterfly is immune to artificial intelligence.

August 18th

Paul Moakley, the *New Yorker* filmmaker, e-mailed us to confirm that he is coming a week from today, with a cinematographer and a sound engineer, and that they will be with us for four days. They want to "document your regular routine at home," as Moakley put it.

The film thing causes me considerable anxiety. I'm still much shakier than I was before the Fall. Any sort of activity leaves me more or less exhausted, and my short-term memory is a constant embarrassment. But for some reason I think it's going to be all right, even if I have to talk about my personal "narrative," that dreadful term which keeps coming up in literary discussions. I can always take refuge in [John Cage's](#) all-purpose stopper: "I have nothing to say, and I'm saying it."

August 22nd

As my daytime naps grow stronger and deeper, it strikes me that this will continue until I just don't wake up. That would qualify as Keats's easeful death.

August 24th

I dreamed that Trump died and went to Heaven, where he immediately set about changing things. He fired a hundred or more of the busier angels, and flew into a rage when they paid no attention to him. St. Benedict, the Angel

of Explanation, took him by the arm. “There are no jobs up here,” he said, “so you can’t really fire people.” Trump fired St. Benedict on the spot and began to work on a financial system that allotted seventeen per cent of Heaven’s assets to Trump. The problem was that money was unknown in Heaven. It took him a while to realize this, and when he tried to will it into existence several angels patted his left arm so sympathetically that it dropped off. Having only one arm was a handicap, and Trump took to raising high his remaining arm and shouting, “Fight!”

After many more failures, Trump gave up on Heaven and decided to return to Earth. The angels agreed to help him do this, but nobody on Earth did. “Never again,” the people said. “He’s a really sore loser.”

September 3rd

The filmmakers have come and gone. Four days and three nights of going about our life “as though they weren’t there,” while cumbersome cameras and sound systems scooped it all up. They filmed the way I combed my hair in the morning, and while I was taking my postprandial nap. I woke up to a long microphone boom three feet from my head. They spent an hour moving and adjusting reflectors so they could get the exact blue tone of my eyes, and more than an hour catching the way a Kleenex half pulled out of its box fluttered in the wind.

All three of them, Paul Moakley; Roxana Reiss, the cinematographer; and Heather Monetti, the sound person, were charming and brimming with energy. Dodie and I both had deep-dish interviews with Moakley. Some of his questions baffled me. For example: “If you were writing a Profile, what would be the first question?” I waffled around that for a bit, asked him to repeat the question, and gave an answer that I recall as being inane. Most of his questions were good, though, and I struggled so hard to find equivalent answers that I had to lie down.

He asked me about my parents. I told him that my mother had grown up in Rome, Georgia, the second of five children of a well-known newspaper editor and publisher named John Temple Graves. He edited, in succession, a number of newspapers owned by [William Randolph Hearst](#), and when Hearst made his ill-considered run for the Presidency, in 1908, my

grandfather was the choice for Vice-President. I never knew either of my grandfathers—they died before I was born—but I grew up thinking that John Temple Graves was an important figure. About thirty years ago, I learned, from W. J. Cash's book, "[The Mind of the South](#)," that he had been an outspoken racist and was largely responsible for inciting the great Atlanta race riot of 1906. I don't know what my mother really thought about slavery and its abolition.



My mother was much warmer than my father. She played the piano and sang songs from Broadway musicals, devoted countless hours to working in her extensive garden, and had many friends in our suburban community. My father was a born New Yorker. In the First World War, he served as an instructor in the newly commissioned Army Air Service. He came back unscathed, in time to rescue the family business, the Newark Plaster Company, from bankruptcy. He expanded the firm's range of products and ran it quite successfully until the mid-nineteen-fifties, when he sold it to the Allied Chemical and Dye Corporation. I sometimes thought he would rather have done something else—been a publisher or maybe even a writer. What gave me this idea was a story he used to tell about Samuel Johnson: The printer who had published Johnson's writings died, and his widow came to Johnson and asked for help. "The only thing he left me was his business," she said, "and I know nothing about printing. What should I do?"

“Do not worry, Madam,” Johnson said, “for if business were difficult, those who do it could not.”

Dad taught me and Fred, my older brother, how to swim, play tennis, ski, sail, ride horses, and fish for smallmouth bass in Canadian lakes. He did everything well, with a kind of inborn authority that I was sure I could never achieve. I had a painful stutter when I was growing up. It didn’t go away until I was in my twenties (it still comes back now and then, in stressful situations), and it was always worse when I talked with my father.

September 24th

We spent last week in New York. Dodie and our French friend [Donatien Grau](#) had recruited twenty-five artists to make works for an exhibition inspired by “[The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay](#),” [Michael Chabon’s](#) novel, which has been re-created as an opera. The exhibition—installed at the Metropolitan Opera House—and the opera were both scheduled to open on Sunday night, ushering in the Met’s fall season.

I had looked forward to being in the city again, after four months in Rhode Island, but I found that I was not at all happy there. Our shabby old building on the Upper East Side had become a construction site. Hardhat workers were pulling up the big cement squares on the wraparound terrace so they could address leaks in the roof, and there was scaffolding on two sides of the building which seemed likely to be there for a long time. Our scruffy penthouse struck me as evidence of a life out of control. For thirty years, we’d been looking for an apartment we could buy (ours is a rental), but every time we came close we both realized that we liked our current one better. The rent kept going up, though, and as a result what we have is high upkeep and no equity. The place is hopelessly cluttered. We ran out of bookshelves years ago, and Dodie’s solution was to stack new books on the floor, with great care given to size, shape, and color—to hell with content. I counted seventeen book towers, some of them quite tall, in the living room alone.

Dodie had arranged for two close friends who were in the show, [John Currin](#) and his wife, [Rachel Feinstein](#), to meet us at our apartment before the opening on Sunday night, to help tie my black bow tie and get us to our seats

in the opera house. Anna Weyant, a young painter who was also in the show, came over, too. She had brought a bottle of chilled Montrachet, which turned our impromptu gathering into an event. After that, we all went in a caravan of cars to the Met. During the half-hour intermission, Dodie showed us as much as she could of her exhibition, called “Super Duper,” for which she had asked the artists to imagine what a superhero would look like today. From my wheelchair (Feebleman takes over at big events), it struck me as a cornucopia of powerful images.

The opening-night audience was wildly enthusiastic about the opera. To me, the music seemed ponderous, but for the first time in ages I could actually hear it. My hearing aids, which had always turned music into noise, had been readjusted the day before, and this time it worked—the music sounded like music. There was a dinner party afterward, and when John and Rachel brought us back uptown it was after midnight.

October 2nd

Culled from the Department of Affordable Aphorisms:

Willful waste makes woeful waffles.

The early bird really dislikes the taste of worms.

Nonagenarians who go to the opera and stay up late need three days to recover.

October 17th

My life as a centenarian is two months away. It looks like a sure thing, although the signs of advanced old age keep mounting. My forgetting machine operates 24/7. For several hours this week, I couldn’t remember the name of Dodie’s brother Powel, who’s been staying with us for a few days, and in the late afternoons my knees are so weak that I wonder if I can make it up the stairs.

I keep telling people that the first hundred years are the hardest, but right now the future looks unpromising. As the late musician and philosopher [Thomas Wright \(Fats\) Waller](#) used to say, “One never knows, do one?”

November 6th

The idea of home has been weighing on me. For seventy years, if someone asked me where I lived I would say—and not without a touch of pride—New York City. But early in the pandemic Dodie and I moved to our small house in Rhode Island, and a year ago we made it our primary residence. I still refer to New York as home, although the noise and confusion and rush of the city now make me edgy and tired. We're back in the city again this week, and it feels less and less like home. Dodie says that when I'm here I miss Rhode Island and when I'm there I miss New York, which is probably true.

Growing up in Llewellyn Park, in West Orange, which is considered the first gated community in America, I could see the tallest Manhattan buildings from my bedroom window. I did not long to go there. Our trips to the city were usually to visit my paternal grandmother, whose sardonic wit made me uneasy. When my brother was first allowed to drink coffee, Grandmother asked him, at breakfast, "And how do you take your coffee, Frederick?" He said, "Black, please." She looked at him quizzically and said, "Hero!"

A few years later, I was taken out of school twice a week and driven into the city, to an institute for speech disorders. My stutter had become a real handicap at school, where some teachers would save me embarrassment by not calling on me. The classes at the institute had no effect whatsoever, so far as I could tell. My stutter came and went for another decade or so, worse in stressful situations (the telephone was one) and barely noticeable in relaxed ones. It stayed that way during my years in the U.S. Navy and at Princeton, and then it just faded away, with brief reappearances here and there. By this time, I was married and living in Manhattan, which was far too exciting in those years to be a home.

Looking back, the whole idea of there being "no place like home" seems a bit ephemeral. I'm sure many people would disagree with that, and, in some ways, I envy them. I certainly don't share [Robert Frost's](#) frosty description of home as "the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in."



November 18th

A small and rather quiet exhibition of works by Robert Rauschenberg opened recently at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. “Quiet” is not a word we associate with this artist, and, of course, it doesn’t really fit. “Barge” (1962-63), a silk-screen painting that occupies most of one wall in the show, is thirty-two feet long, and the images in it range from trucks, rooftop water towers, spacecrafts, stencilled text, football players, highway interchanges, and an enlarged mosquito to parts of [Velázquez’s](#) “Rokeby Venus.” But many of the fifteen drawings, prints, and paintings on view have the delicate, subtle quietude that this protean artist could summon whenever he felt like it. The show marks what would have been Rauschenberg’s hundredth birthday (he died in 2008), and it set me thinking about my relationship with Bob and how it influenced my understanding of contemporary art.

We met in 1961. I was working on my Jean Tinguely Profile, and someone told me I should talk to Rauschenberg about him. The two of them had bonded, the person said, when Tinguely came to the city in 1960 to create “Homage to New York.” Tinguely had asked Rauschenberg to contribute something to his self-destroying sculpture in the garden at *MOMA*, and Bob contributed a “money-thrower” device that scattered silver dollars on Tinguely’s mega-work while it was committing suicide. I went to Bob’s

studio, a large loft on lower Broadway, and we talked about Tinguely and God knows what else for at least two hours. Bob and I were the same age, but our backgrounds could hardly have been more different. He had grown up in Port Arthur, Texas, and didn't discover that there was such a thing as being an artist until he joined the Navy and went to the Huntington Library and Art Museum, in San Marino, California. Among the many things I learned in our first conversation was that self-expression had no connection with what he was doing. "I want what I do to be more interesting than that," he told me.

I spent many hours in Bob's loft, while I was writing about him for the magazine and afterward, when I was working on his biography. During much of that time, I was waiting until he felt like answering my questions. People—friends, other artists, dealers, museum curators—kept arriving and leaving, and I had to wait my turn. Although Bob admitted to being dyslexic, he was a brilliant talker, and he knew quite a lot about many things. For Bob, making art was always a collaboration of one kind or another. He collaborated with the materials he chose to put in his combines, many of which—an Angora goat with an automobile tire around its middle, an ancient quilt that he didn't need because warm weather had set in—were making their *début* appearance in a work of art. Bob didn't want to exert control over these objects; he wanted to let each one show him what to do with it.

I used to wonder if Bob's work could last, physically. All those non-art materials seemed to invite the ravages of time, and some of the combines, I'd say, have begun to seem like relics. But to anyone who has looked at a Rauschenberg, really looked, this hardly matters, because the images are so deeply imprinted on your mind's eye. The critic [Hilton Als](#), writing in the November 17th issue of *The New Yorker*, makes a compelling argument for the staying power of Rauschenberg's work, which is as influential today as it was in the nineteen-fifties.

In 1959, when I was just starting to get interested in the art of our time, I did something that I had never done before and would never do again. I was at the Museum of Modern Art, standing in front of a piece called "Double Feature," by Rauschenberg, in an exhibition called "16 Americans." It was a medium-sized collage, one of whose elements was part of a man's shirt—the

part with a small pocket. By chance, I was alone in the gallery. My heart was racing. I fished a quarter out of my pants and slipped it into the shirt pocket in the collage. What was I thinking? That this act somehow made me a participant? Or was it just a quiet bravo, a vote of confidence? It made me feel good for the rest of the afternoon.

November 24th

As December 17th draws closer, I've started to wonder about the future. I'd like to keep going with this chronicle, but my eyes are getting weaker, less and less able to perform my part of the writing process that Dodie makes possible. When she types my spoken text, I spend the next few days editing it on my antediluvian laptop—changing words, deleting sections and redoing them, fine-tuning the focus. This gets harder and harder, but the alternative, I fear, is doing nothing. I may be a prisoner of prose.

December 4th

I woke up to go to the bathroom at a few minutes after three on Thanksgiving morning, but my legs wouldn't take me there. Dodie, who hears everything, asked, "Are you all right?"

My attempt to explain was so slurred that we both knew the answer was no. I'd had a stroke.

It's now a week later, and there's little or no progress. I can walk a bit, very slowly and with Dodie's help. The slurring comes and goes. We are cancelling nonessential appointments, but not the medical tests, which all confirm the stroke.

I can do a pretty fair imitation of somebody who has not had a stroke, but I don't fool anyone.

December 6th

The medical consensus seems to be that I will get a lot better, but it will take time, and (wouldn't you know) I'll have to do most of the work—new exercises ahoy. Meanwhile, my centennial is at the door.

This will be the last entry for a while. ♦

Puzzles & Games

- [Going to Press](#)
- [In a Flurry](#)
- [Shuffalo: Monday, December 15, 2025](#)
- [Rough Copy](#)
- [The Cryptic Crossword: Sondheim Edition](#)

Going to Press

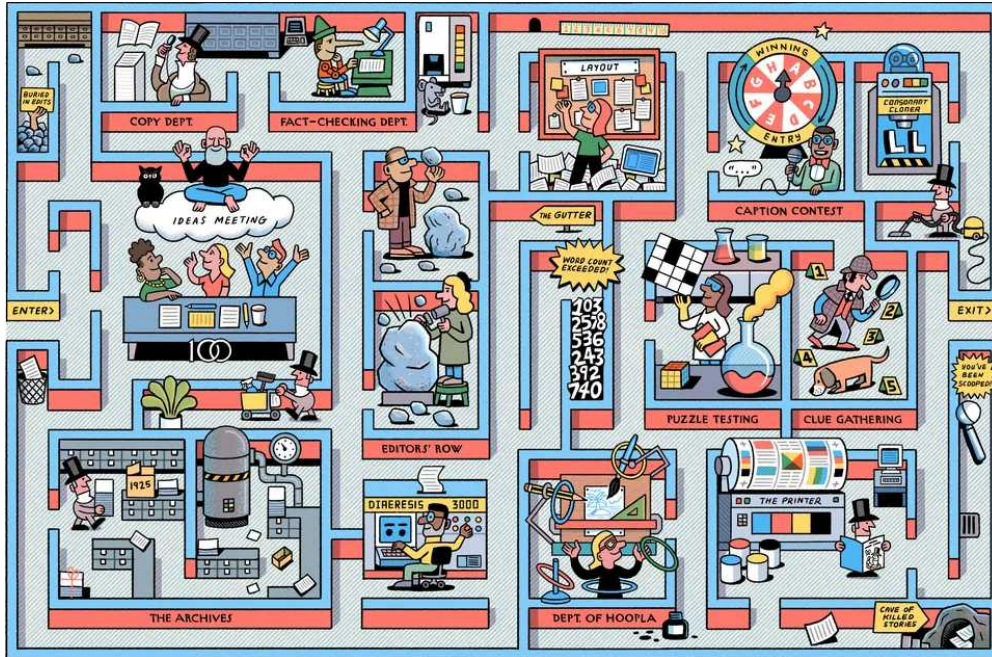
By The New Yorker, Allan Sanders

December 15, 2025



Assembling a magazine can feel like navigating a labyrinth—especially in the Daedalian offices of *The New Yorker*, where one wrong turn can lead to publishing peril. This year's Cartoons & Puzzles issue offers a glimpse into our playful periodical's hundred-year history. Can you make your way through the maze and close the issue before our printer shuts down for the holidays?

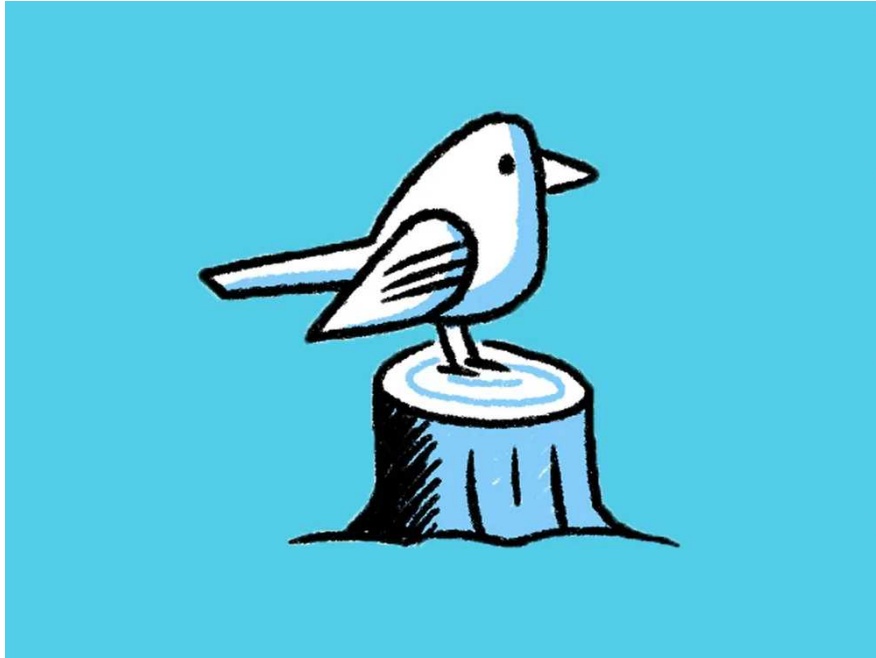
[Printer-friendly version](#) | [Get answers](#)



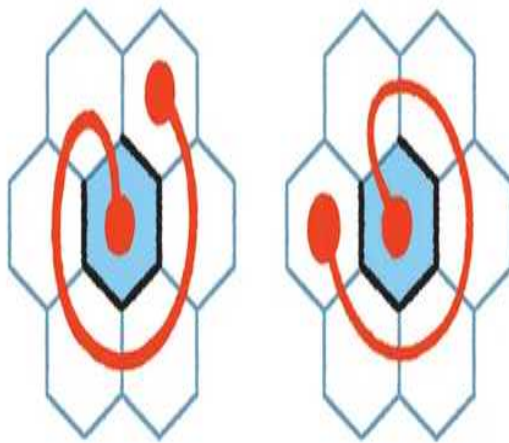
In a Flurry

By Patrick Berry

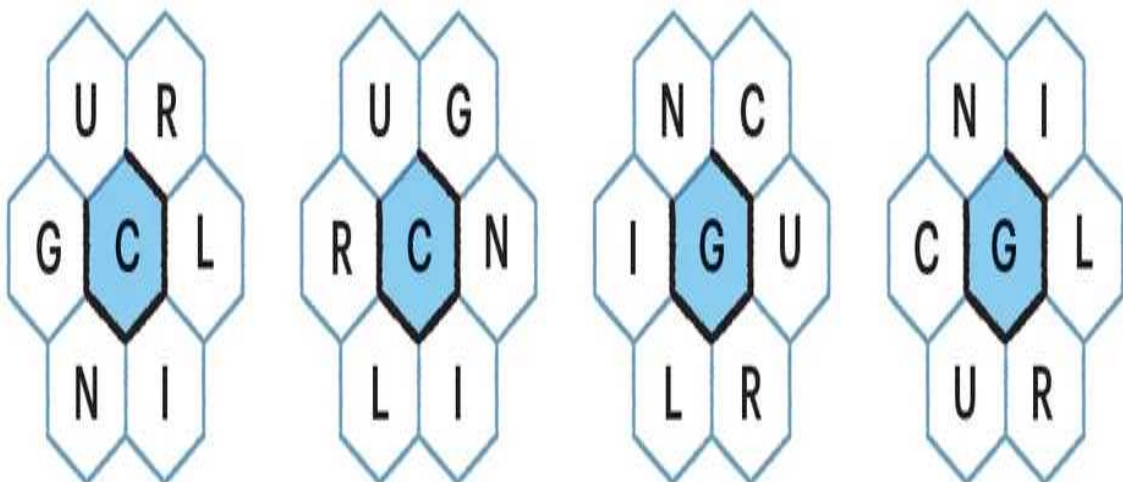
December 15, 2025



Our cartoon caption was lost in a blizzard! Solve the clues to help us find it. Each answer is seven letters long and curls around one of the numbered spaces in the grid, as shown below:

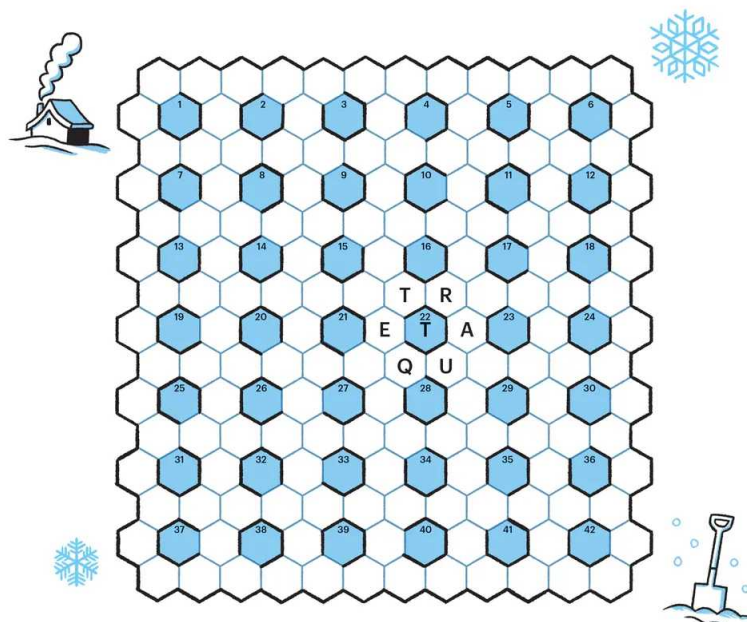


The numbered space will always contain either the first letter or the last letter of an answer. The remaining letters will curl either clockwise or counterclockwise, exiting or entering the central hexagon through the gap in the bolded border. Each answer has four possible arrangements, as shown with the answer CURLING below:



We've placed one answer in the grid to get you started. As an additional solving aid, the top and bottom rows of the grid will contain the exact same sequence of letters. When you've completed the grid, the letters in the numbered spaces will spell out the missing caption.

[Printer-friendly version](#) | [Answer key](#)



CLUES

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 Asian noodle dish often made with eggs and shrimp: 2 wds. | 15 Lover of fine dining | 29 Game with flippers, bumpers, and plungers |
| 2 Take for a trial run: 2 wds. | 16 2011 novel about a stranded astronaut, with "The" | 30 Regardless of |
| 3 Lays waste to, as a hotel room | 17 Wrinkly-faced dog breed: Hyph. | 31 Tourneys held annually at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center: 2 wds. |
| 4 In the mood for love | 18 Black ____ Party (organization founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton) | 32 Quickest flight option |
| 5 Place where military decisions are made: 2 wds. | 19 Like Albany, vis-à-vis New York City | 33 Artist who was granted a co-writing credit for the song "Imagine," in 2017: 2 wds. |
| 6 Site of a famed flag-raising: 2 wds. | 20 Pillar flanking a headboard | 34 Small African member of the mongoose family |
| 7 Driver who makes passing difficult: 2 wds. | 21 Frozen solid?: 2 wds. | 35 Device sold with a Siri Remote: 2 wds. |
| 8 Performer who wrote the 1910 book "Handcuff Secrets" | 22 ~~Trio~~ plus one | 36 Submits a résumé |
| 9 Got a charley horse, say | 23 Wedding-reception amenity: 2 wds. | 37 Captain Ahab's weapon of choice |
| 10 Tusked creature of the Ice Age | 24 Old pro | 38 Carbon-14 or uranium-238 |
| 11 Spot to rest a cigarette | 25 Surname of a Transylvanian American sitcom family of the sixties | 39 Doggies |
| 12 "Justified" star Olyphant | 26 "Well, what's your decision?": 3 wds. | 40 Digitally alter, as a photo |
| 13 P. G. Wodehouse character with a valet named Jeeves | 27 Singer with the album "Cowboy Carter" | 41 "You missed your chance!": 2 wds. |
| 14 Added to the payroll: 2 wds. | 28 DC Comics superhero who rules Atlantis | 42 Get one's ____ (derive pleasure) |

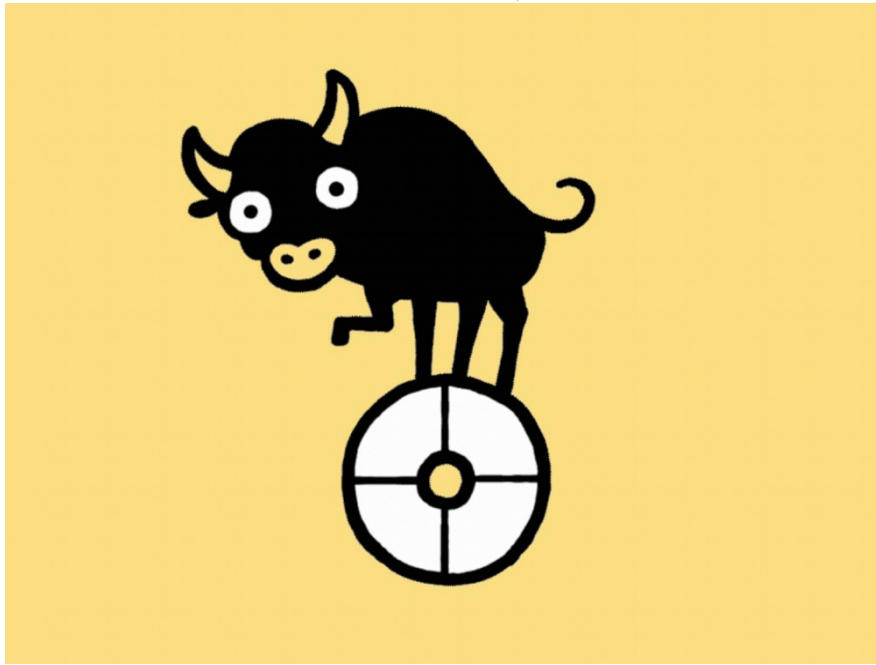


Shuffalo

Shuffalo: Monday, December 15, 2025

Can you make a longer word with each new letter?

December 15, 2025



Puzzles & Games Dept.

Rough Copy

A puzzle with a few clues loose.

By Mollie Cowger

December 15, 2025



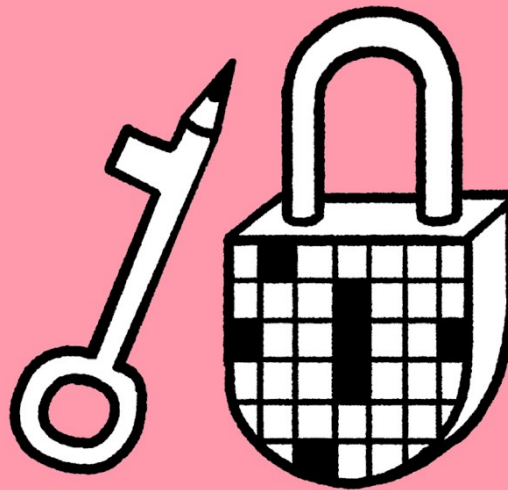
Puzzles & Games Dept.

The Cryptic Crossword: Sondheim Edition

An enigmatic tribute to the Broadway legend.

By Paolo Pasco

December 15, 2025



Comics

- [Gahan Wilson, *Hilarious and Terrifying*](#)
- [Helen Hokinson, *a Happy Woman*](#)
- [James Thurber, *Consummate Doodler*](#)
- [Alice Harvey, *Humor Pathfinder*](#)
- [J. J. Sempé, *Deity of Whimsy*](#)
- [William Steig, *Bursting with Joy*](#)

Comic Strip

Gahan Wilson, Hilarious and Terrifying

He had his own world: a place where the funny and the horrific crossed paths.

By Roz Chast

December 15, 2025

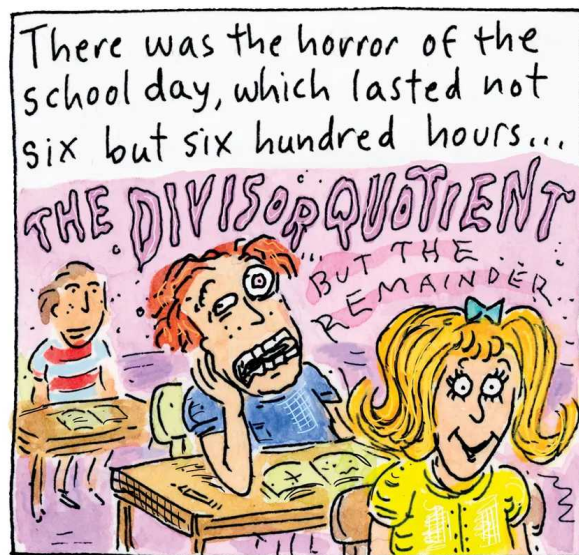


I first saw Gahan Wilson's cartoons when I was a teen-ager. He had a monthly strip called "NUTS" - a parody of "Peanuts" - which ran in the *National Lampoon*.

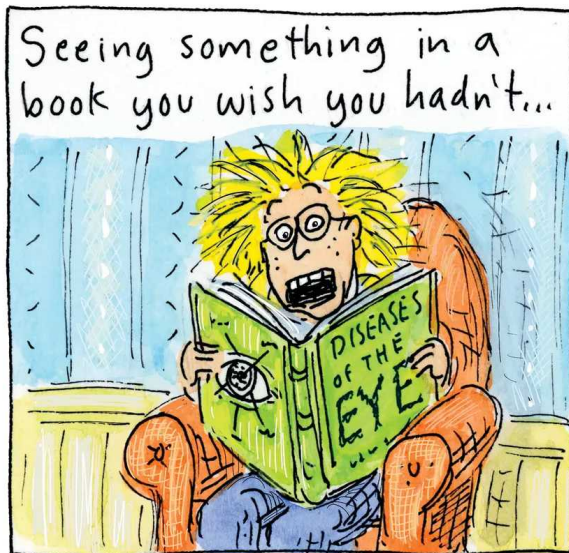


"NUTS" was the truest portrayal of what it's like to be a kid. It was childhood stripped of sentimentality. I.e., not:



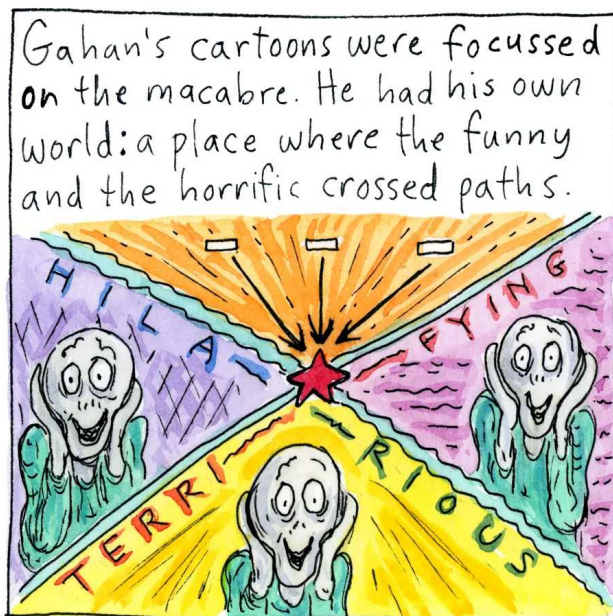






And, of course, the horror
underlying all horrors:
the dawning awareness
of death.





His subject matter included brains in jars, people turning into fungi, murderous ophthalmologists, cannibalistic camp counsellors, aliens, monsters under the bed, and unexpected spurts of violence. When I saw this cartoon in *The New Yorker*, I asked Gahan if he would want to trade cartoons, and, miracle of miracles, he did.



I feel a deep connection between horror and humor. Certain kinds of horror, anyway.



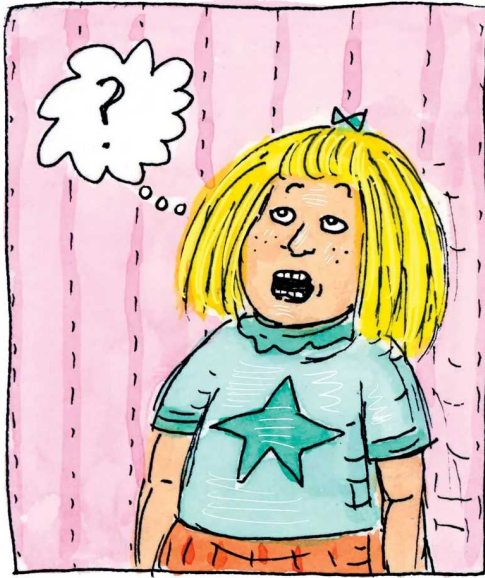
Recently, my four-year-old granddaughter asked me:



I tried to explain about SURPRISE and told her a joke:

A man goes to a restaurant.
The waiter brings him soup,
but there's a FLY in the soup!
He says to the waiter,
"What's that fly doing in
my soup?!" The waiter
answers, "The
backstroke."







R. CHS

Comic Strip

Helen Hokinson, a Happy Woman

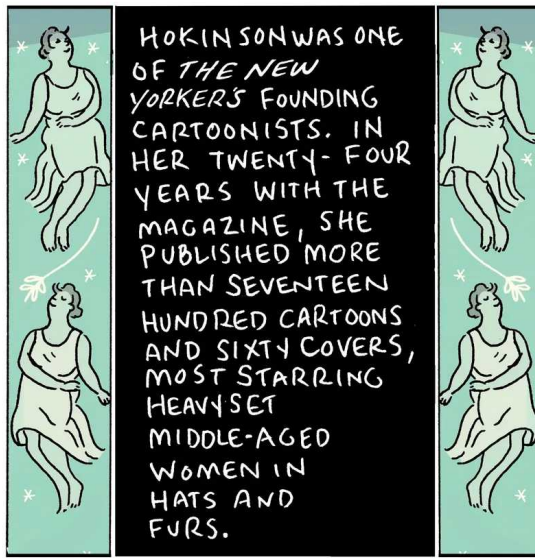
Her version of the middle-aged matron was a gentle innocent who faced the world with an unself-conscious enthusiasm.

By Summer Pierre

December 15, 2025









BEGAN APPEARING
REGULARLY IN *THE NEW
YORKER* IN JULY OF 1925.

HER FIRST
PUBLISHED DRAWING



BEFORE LONG, THE EDITORS
STARTED ADDING CAPTIONS TO
HER DRAWINGS, OFFICIALLY
MAKING THEM CARTOONS.





THEIR COLLABORATION DISTILLED THE HOKINSON WOMAN INTO AN ADORED CULTURAL ICON.



IN HOKINSON'S TIME, THE CHIN-LESS MIDDLE-AGED MATRON WAS A FAMILIAR CARTOONING TROPE.



BUT, IN HER MALE COLLEAGUES' HANDS, THIS CHARACTER WAS OFTEN DEPICTED AS ANGRY AND DOMINEERING.

PETER ARNO:

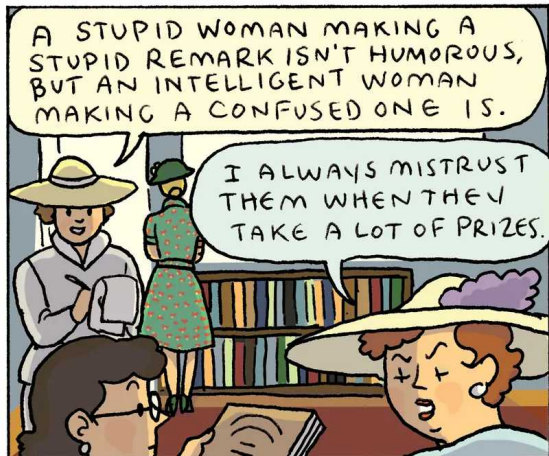
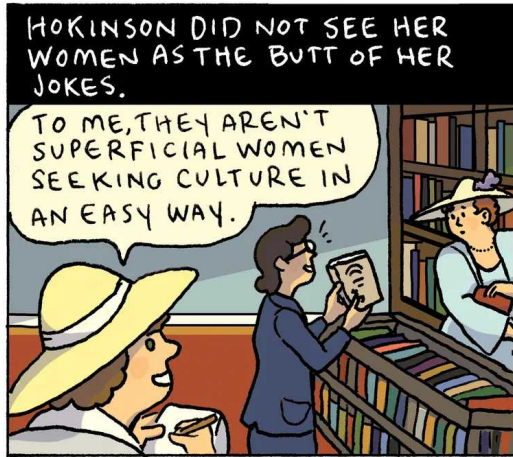


"I said the lid snapped my meringue off!"

HOKINSON'S VERSION WAS A GENTLE INNOCENT WHO FACED THE WORLD WITH AN UNSELF-CONSCIOUS ENTHUSIASM.



STILL, MANY READERS MISSED THE DIFFERENCE IN PERSPECTIVE.



I AGREE. I SEE THEM AS WELL-EDUCATED WOMEN LIVING ACTIVE, CULTURED LIVES THAT DO NOT REVOLVE AROUND HUSBANDS OR CHILDREN.



"Well, if your husband isn't going to be at Hot Springs, either, we can get in all sorts of mischief."

THEIR ENTHUSIASM IS A JOY.

TO COMBAT THIS MISCONCEPTION, HOKINSON TRIED WRITING A PLAY ABOUT HER WOMEN.



SHE ALSO BEGAN GIVING TALKS TO EXPLAIN HER PERSPECTIVE.



SHE WAS ON HER WAY TO WASHINGTON, D.C., TO GIVE SUCH A TALK, WHEN SHE SPOTTED AN ARGUING COUPLE SHE THOUGHT MIGHT MAKE A GOOD CARTOON.

LAGUARDIA AIRPORT,
NOVEMBER 1, 1949:



SHE SKETCHED THEM ON A
POSTCARD AND MAILED IT TO
JAMES REID PARKER BEFORE
BOARDING HER PLANE.

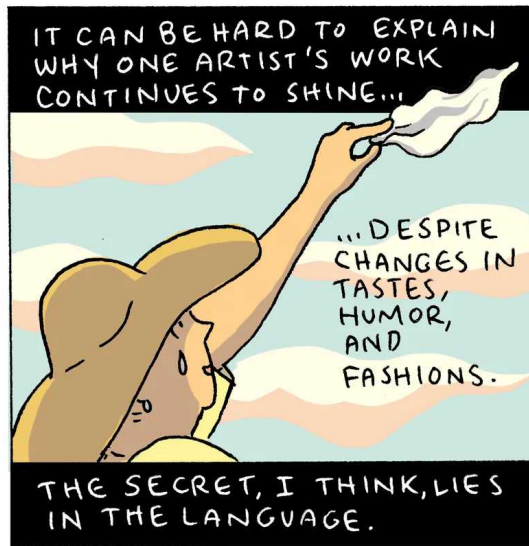


IT MUST HAVE BEEN A SHOCK
TO RECEIVE IT SOME DAYS LATER...

BECAUSE HOKINSON DIED
ON THAT FLIGHT ...



WHEN HER PLANE COLLIDED
WITH ANOTHER, KILLING ALL
ON BOARD.



Comic Strip

James Thurber, Consummate Doodler

It wasn't until I started cartooning myself that I realized he only made it look easy.

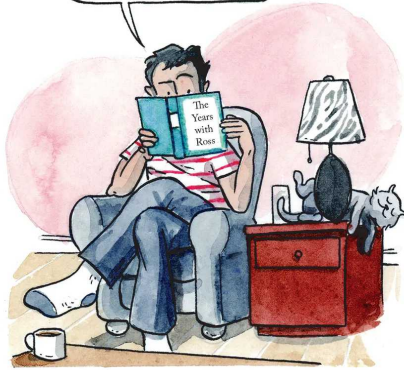
By Navied Mahdavian

December 15, 2025



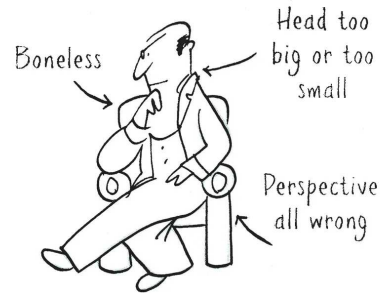
I remember the first time I saw a James Thurber cartoon...

I could do that.



I thought it was terrible.

I wasn't alone. Thurber recalled another cartoonist once yelling at *The New Yorker's* first editor, Harold Ross, "Why do you reject drawings of mine, and print stuff by that fifth-rate artist Thurber?"



Dorothy Parker called his drawings "unbaked cookies."

It wasn't until I started cartooning myself that I realized he only made it look easy.

Touche', Jimmy.



Like me, he didn't consider himself an artist first. He said, "I'm a painstaking writer who doodles for relaxation."

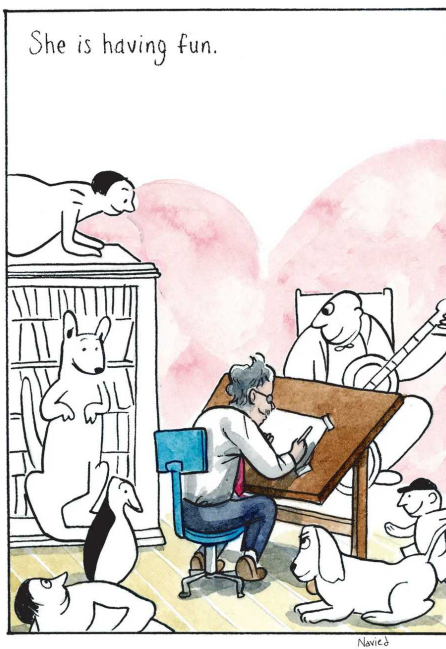
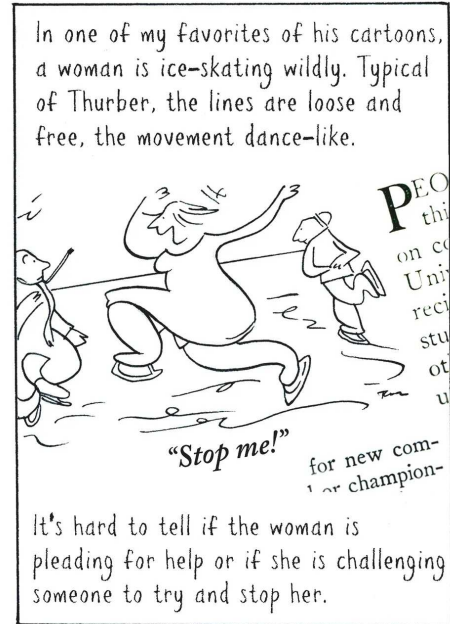
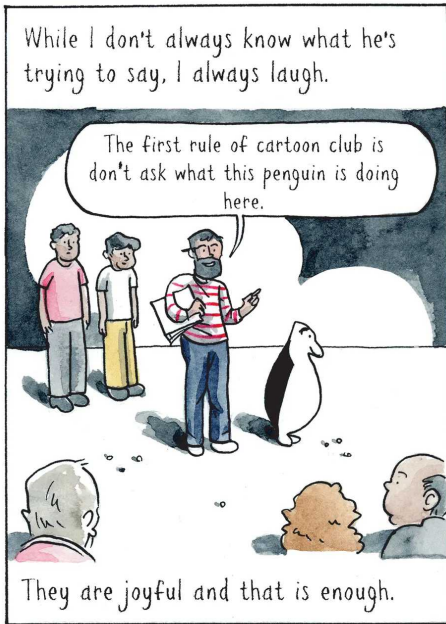


Some of my favorite cartoons of Thurber's came about because he couldn't draw what he initially intended.



By the nineteen-forties, Thurber was going blind, the result of a childhood accident. But he continued writing and even drawing. He used magnifying glasses and drew on large sheets of paper.





Comic Strip

Alice Harvey, Humor Pathfinder

My hand twitches with instinctive joy at how you draw a woman's hat, coat, stance.

By Emily Flake

December 15, 2025



DEAR ALICE HARVEY,



LET ME BEGIN BY QUOTING
ANOTHER LETTER TO YOU.

"You are one of the
three or four pathfinders
in what is called the
new school of American
humor."

- Harold Ross, editor of
The New Yorker, 1925

I LIKE TO IMAGINE YOU
SHOWING THAT LETTER
TO HELEN HOKINSON.



I OUGHTA PUT
"PATHFINDER" ON
MY CALLING CARD!



MAYBE SKETCHING THROUGH
THE HANGOVER THE NEXT DAY.



MY HAND TWITCHES WITH
INSTINCTIVE JOY AT HOW YOU
DRAW A WOMAN'S HAT, COAT, STANCE.



AND MY HEART TWITCHES
AT YOUR ZINGERS.



*"Oh, she's very attractive. I
don't like her at all."*

DID YOU MISS THE CITY WHEN YOU LEFT?



DID WESTPORT GIVE YOU ANY JOKES?

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE
DECADES AFTER THE MAGAZINE
STOPPED BUYING YOUR CARTOONS?



I LIKE TO IMAGINE YOU IN
SOME SUBURBAN MILIEU,
CAPTURING IT WITH YOUR PENCILS...



IF ONLY FOR YOURSELF.

AH, HOKY,
I WISH YOU
COULDA SEEN
THIS ONE.



e.flake

Comic Strip

J. J. Sempé, Deity of Whimsy

His urban idylls are populated by bald businessmen who escape reality by biking and daydreaming.

By Ali Fitzgerald

December 15, 2025



MAINTAINING A SENSE OF
CHILDLIKE WONDER ISN'T
EASY IN A DARKENING WORLD.



AS A NEW PARISIAN, I LIKE TO IMAGINE
MYSELF AS A SEMPÉ-IAN
CITY DWELLER—



A SMALL FIGURE WHO FINDS
TRANSCENDENCE IN THE
UGLY AND MUNDANE.



JEAN-JACQUES SEMPE, WHO DIED IN 2022
AND DREW FOR THE NEW YORKER FOR
FORTY-FOUR YEARS, IS A DEITY OF WHIMSY.



HIS URBAN IDYLLS ARE LINED WITH MANSARD ROOFS
AND POPULATED BY BALD BUSINESSMEN WHO
ABANDON REALITY BY BIKING AND DAYDREAMING.



CYCLING PROVIDED ONE ESCAPE DURING
SEMPÉ'S DREARY AND VIOLENT CHILDHOOD
IN SUBURBAN BORDEAUX.



DOODLING WAS ANOTHER.



THIS WINTER, I TRAVELLED TO
BORDEAUX ON MY WAY TO
THE ATLANTIC.



WALKING AMONG IMPOSING DUNES AND
HALF-BURIED BUNKERS, I WAS REMINDED
OF SEMPÉ'S BEACH PAINTINGS.



I FELT A THRILL IN BEING ALONE—



IN GREETING THE VAST
WATERCOLORED UNKNOWN.



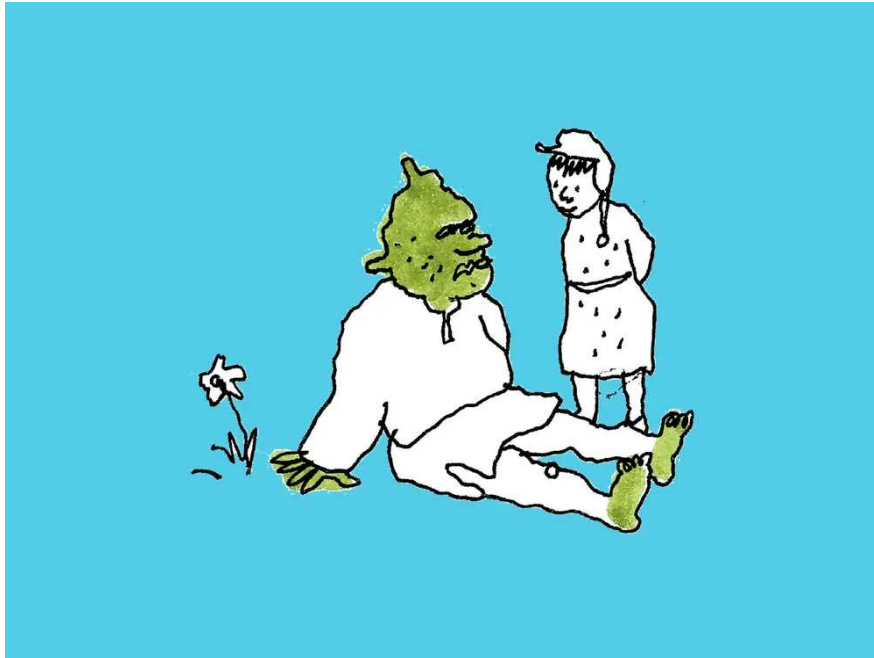
Comic Strip

William Steig, Bursting with Joy

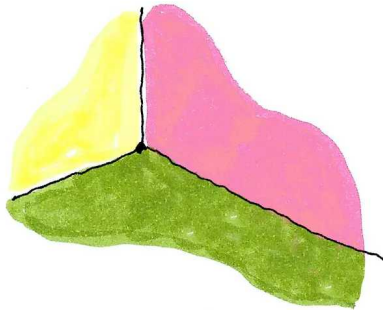
He shies away neither from harshness nor from unadulterated sweetness. He also writes great female characters.

By Liana Finck

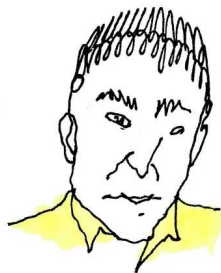
December 15, 2025



IN A VERY SPECIFIC CORNER OF
THE CARTOON WORLD —



YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE: YOU'RE
EITHER A STEINBERG PERSON OR
A STEIG PERSON.

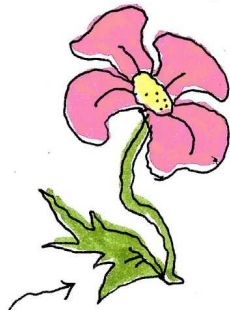


WILLIAM STEIG



SAUL STEINBERG

YOU'RE ALIGNED WITH EITHER THE
WILD, MOODY, EBULLIENT WILLIAM
STEIG (1907-2003) -



A STEIGIAN FLOWER

OR THE ALLOOF, INTELLECTUAL,
ELEGANT SAUL STEINBERG
(1914-99).



← A STEINBERGIAN
QUESTION MARK

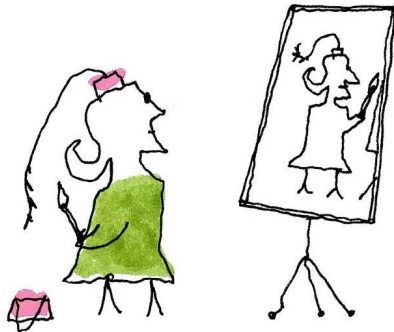
ALL CHILDREN ARE STEIG PEOPLE~



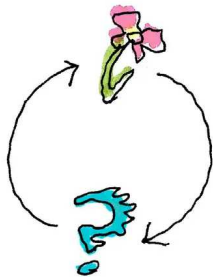
WHEREAS ART STUDENTS—AT LEAST,
THOSE WHO HAVEN'T BEEN BRAIN-
WASHED INTO THINKING CARTOONS
DON'T COUNT AS ART—



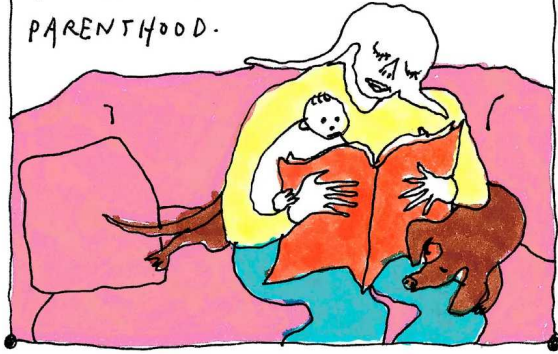
ARE STEINBERGIANS.



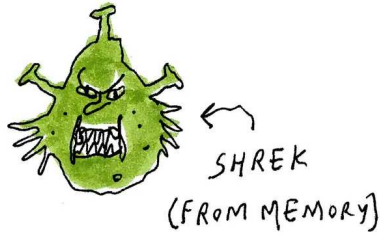
AS A NEWISH PARENT, I'VE
EXPERIENCED, WITH WONDER, A
SHIFT BACK TO STEIG.



GETTING TO REVISIT CLASSIC
CHILDREN'S BOOKS SHOULD BE
COUNTED AMONG THE PROFOUND
AND LIFE-CHANGING DELIGHTS OF
PARENTHOOD.



STEIG WROTE AND ILLUSTRATED
THIRTY OR SO, INCLUDING
"SYLVESTER AND THE MAGIC PEBBLE,"
"PETE'S A PIZZA," "AMOS & BORIS,"
"BRAVE IRENE," AND (YES) "SHREK!"

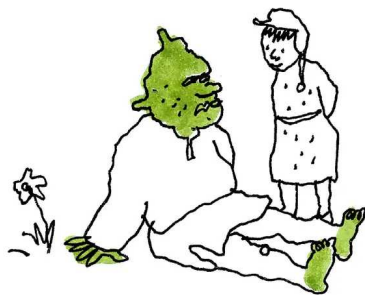


HE DIDN'T START MAKING THESE
BOOKS UNTIL HIS SIXTIES—



STEIG (FROM
IMAGINATION)

WHICH MIGHT EXPLAIN WHY STEIG
THE CHILDREN'S-BOOK AUTHOR IS
PURE STEIG: HE DOESN'T CATER
TOO CAREFULLY TO CHILDREN.



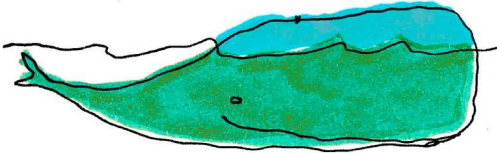
HIS BOOKS USE FLOURISHY LANGUAGE, WHICH I REMEMBER FLOATING ENTICINGLY OVER MY HEAD AS A KID.

Amos, a mouse, lived by the ocean. He loved the ocean. He loved the smell of sea air. He loved to hear the surf sounds—the bursting breakers, the backwashes with rolling pebbles.

↑
FROM "AMOS
& BORIS"

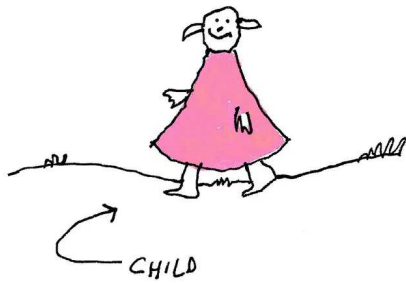


AND HIS PLOTS ARE RADICALLY UNCONSTRAINED, HINGING ON COINCIDENCES, RANDOM TURNS OF EVENT, FLIGHTS OF FANCY, YOU NAME IT.



↑
BORIS

HE FLIES IN THE FACE OF THE
CONVENTIONAL WISDOM THAT
CHILDREN NEED A CLEAR STORY ARC
AND ARE BIG ON CHARACTER DEVELOP-
MENT AND LESSONS LEARNED.



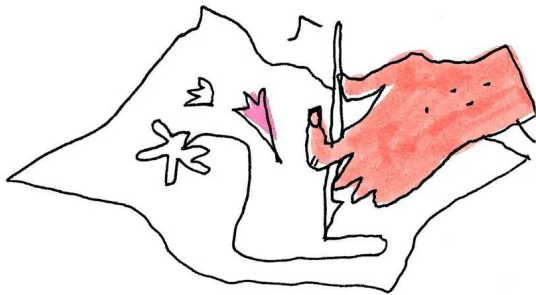


HE ALSO WRITES GREAT FEMALE
CHARACTERS.



CALEB AND KATE, FROM "CALEB & KATE"

MOST IMPORTANT, STEIG'S CHILDREN'S
BOOKS ARE IRRESISTIBLE.



THEY BURST WITH JOY.

STEIG WAS, AMONG OTHER THINGS,
A GREAT COLORIST —



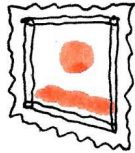
A SKILL HE HONED OVER DECADES
DRAWING AT THE NEW YORKER.

LOOKING AT STEIG'S FOUR HEFTY
BOOKS OF ARCHIVES AT THIS
MAGAZINE'S OFFICES, I FELT
MYSELF WELLING UP.

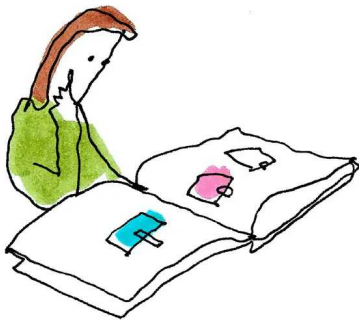


IT WAS THE FEELING ONE SO
OFTEN HAS WHEN LOOKING AT
REALLY GOOD ART: RECOGNITION.

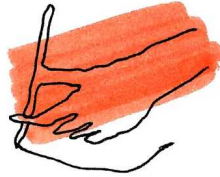
VAN GOGH
IS ME!



BUT, IN MY CASE, I WAS ONTO
SOMETHING. I THINK ALL
CARTOONISTS CAN SEE THEM-
SELVES IN STEIG.



STEIG WAS A COMPULSIVE
DRAW-ER. SOMEONE WHO NEEDED
TO DRAW TO THINK.



(HE WAS ALSO SOMEONE WHO
NEEDED TO THINK TO DRAW,
BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY.)

STEIG PUBLISHED MORE OR LESS
WEEKLY IN THE NEW YORKER FOR
SEVENTY-THREE YEARS—



TRADITIONAL
SINGLE-PANEL
CARTOON

"My youngest is a terror. We can't
do a thing with 'im."

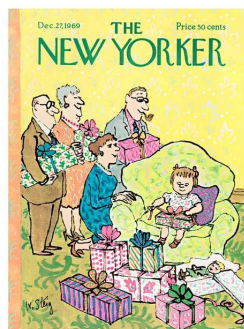


SMALL FRY

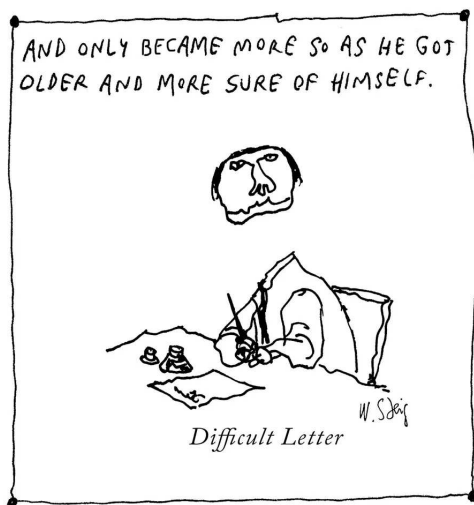
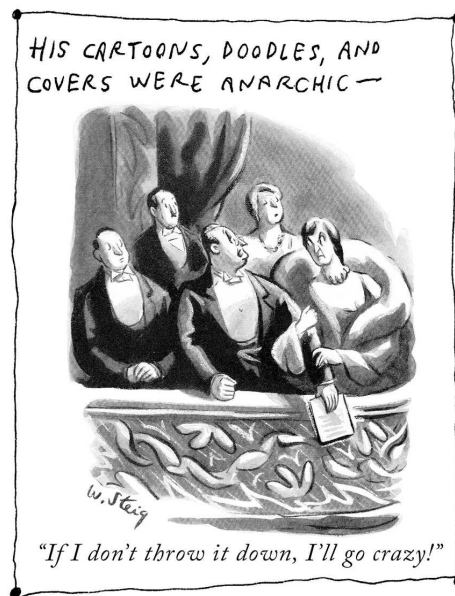
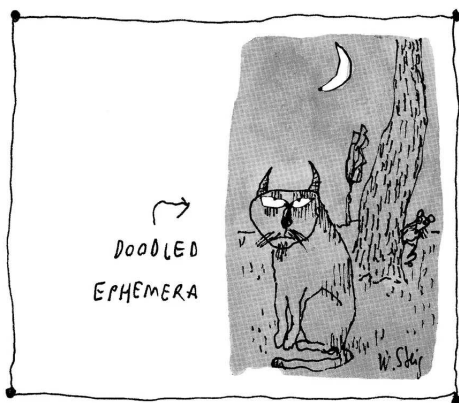
"That's for squealers!"

A RECURRING SERIES

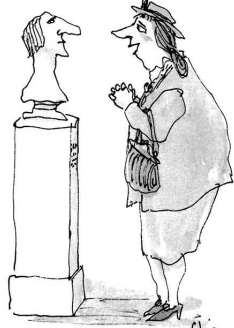
AND HAD A BROAD CANVAS WITHIN
THE MAGAZINE.



A 1969
COVER



NOW AND THEN, STEIG SERVES UP A
DIAMOND-CLEAN, HIT-YOU-OVER-THE-
HEAD PUNCH LINE.



"I just love your poetry."

USUALLY NOT.



Love in the Alps

TO EDIT ONESELF IS SOMETHING
MOST PEOPLE ARE ABLE TO DO, TO
SOME EXTENT —



AND A LUCKY FEW (POLITICIANS,*
BALLERINAS) EXCEL AT.



*PRE-2015

NOT THE WILD CARTOONIST.



I FIND THAT, THE MORE VORACIOUSLY
CARTOONISTS DRAW, THE LESS
THEY SELF-EDIT. IT WOULD BE
LIKE CAREFULLY CHOOSING WHICH
BREATHS TO BREATHE.

WE CARTOONISTS ARE IN A BIND:
CENSOR OURSELVES INTO OBLIVION—



OR LET IT ALL OUT AND RISK BEING
UNPALATABLE, RUDE, OR WRONG, OR
FALLING OFF THE FACE OF THE
EARTH SOMEHOW.

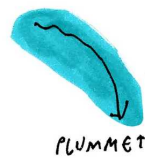


HE WAS REWARDED FOR HIS COM-
PULSIVE OUTPUT.



HE DID NOT FALL PREY TO
THE DEMONS THAT GET 99%
OF COMPULSIVE DRAW-ERS.

—...y
FIZZLE



PLUMMET



?

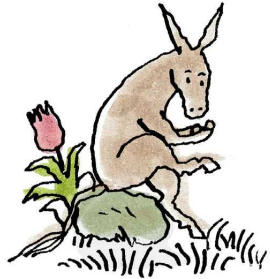
THE RESULT WAS THAT STEIG
JUST KEPT ON BEING HIS
IRREPRESSIBLE SELF, FOR DECADES.



THE MINSTRELPIG"

ROLAND, FROM "ROLAND

HE WAS ABLE TO TAKE HIS TIME,
FIGURING THINGS OUT IN HIS
OWN WAY.



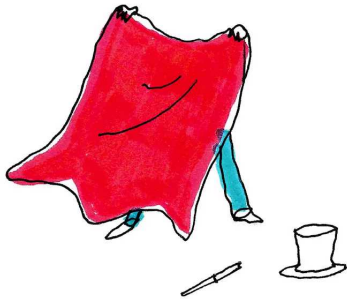
SYLVESTER, FROM "SYLVESTER

AND THE MAGIC PEBBLE"

THIS IS WHAT ENABLED HIM
TO CRACK THE CODE OF COLOR
SEEMINGLY OUT OF NOWHERE.



IT'S WHAT ALLOWED HIM TO REMAKE
HIMSELF AS A CHILDREN'S-BOOK
AUTHOR.



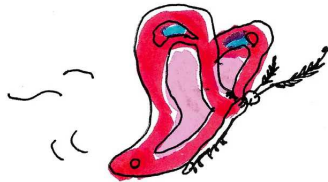
I DON'T FEEL LIKE THE SAME PERSON
I WAS FOUR YEARS AGO, BEFORE I
HAD KIDS.



I FEEL SO WEEPY-GLAD, WHEN I READ
TO MY SON, THAT MY FRIEND STEIG
HAS MET ME HERE IN MY NEW LIFE.



HE IS PROOF THAT WE CARTOONISTS
CAN KEEP REINVENTING OURSELVES
NO MATTER WHAT LIFE THROWS AT
US.



LFINCK

Takes

- [Emma Allen on Otto Soglow's Spot Art](#)

Takes

Emma Allen on Otto Soglow's Spot Art

By Emma Allen

December 14, 2025



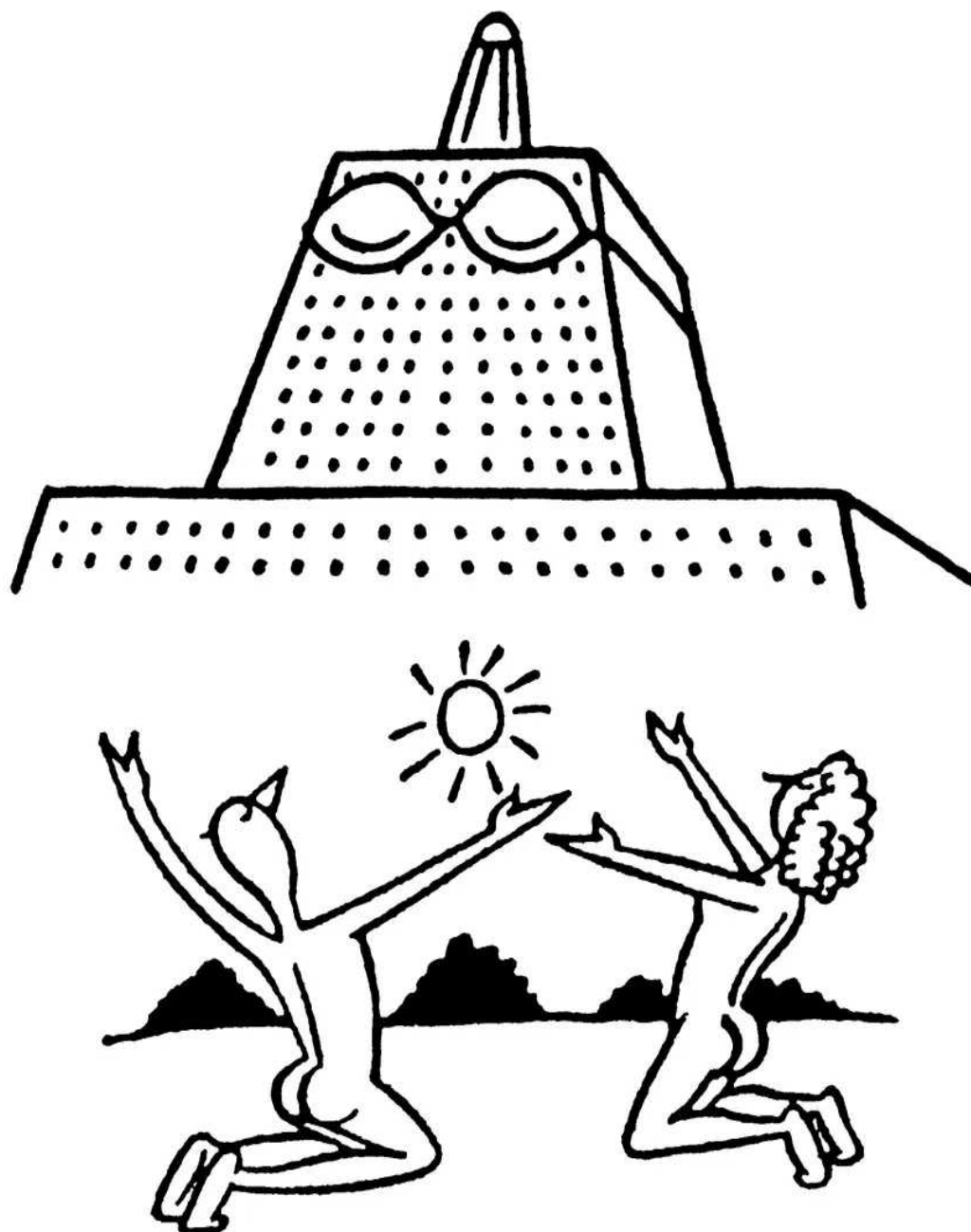
The New Yorker doesn't easily let go of the old stuff. Recently, our copy department retired the hyphen we'd kept in "in-box" for longer than anyone should keep anything in an inbox. But "teen-ager" clings to its appropriately awkward hyphen, and "coöperation" retains its diaeresis. (Don't call it an umlaut.) My favorite still functioning relics are two fat binders of "Talk spots"—hundreds of postage-stamp-size drawings that appear at the tops of Talk of the Town pieces, which the cartoonist Otto Soglow drew from 1926 to 1970, to illustrate stories in the section, and which have (mostly) been paired with new Talk pieces ever since.

One of my first jobs at the magazine was to flip through these binders and pick decades-old drawings to run alongside some of our timeliest stories. It was astonishing how well these vintage vignettes continued to match the week's news. Sure, over the years hemlines fluctuate; TV replaces radio; Nixon's jowls droop. But something about the drawings' look and tone is

ageless. On a micro scale, they display the cheekiness and the reverence for the hyper-specific that make up the magazine's DNA.

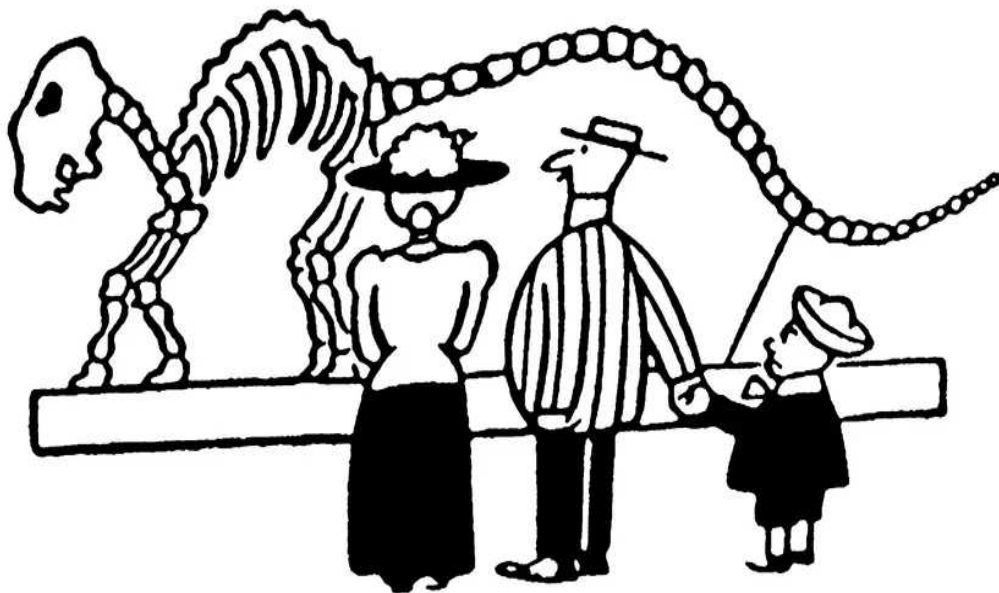
Soglow was born in Manhattan in 1900, and pretty much never left. He wanted to be an actor but settled for being a cartoonist, and was best known for his syndicated comic "The Little King," a wordless strip about a rotund, charmingly immature monarch. Soglow's first *New Yorker* cartoon was published nine months into the magazine's existence, and his increasingly spare aesthetic, which eschewed text and favored a clean, elegant line, was a harbinger of a style that became immensely popular.

When Soglow died, in 1975, the magazine's editor, William Shawn, [wrote of his Talk spots](#), "He worked on these modest drawings with great seriousness, spending hours on each of them to get the meaning and the composition right." Shawn describes Soglow as "a sweet-spirited, melancholy-looking, reticent man." (His collected spots were published under the sweet-spirited, melancholy titles "Ho Hum" and "More Ho Hum," although, per other accounts, Soglow was a bit of a party animal.)



But back to the spots. I recently dug up the Talk stories that originally ran alongside a handful of Soglow's diminutive drawings—the images that most mystified or charmed me. [A piece](#) from the May 9, 1931, issue, accompanied by a skyscraper wearing what I always assumed were sunglasses, reads, “Too little emphasis was placed, at the opening of the Empire State Building, on the topmost tenant. It is significant that the world’s most magnificent architectural creation should be crowned by the Model Brassière Company. . . . We take off our hat to the architects and

engineers who were able to lift a brassière company eleven hundred feet above the ground.”



A drawing of two naked people worshipping the sun was paired with [a story](#) commenting on the “great growth of nudist cults” (July 21, 1934). A spot of a sculptor carving what seems to be a duck was, in fact, drawn for [a piece](#), from 1950, about a woman carving a duck out of a chunk of marble scavenged from the construction site of the N.Y.U. law-school building.

(We'd be pleased to run such a story today!) A dinosaur-skeleton drawing long used to illustrate stories about the Natural History Museum first ran above [a 1938 account](#) of how the government was buying drab clothing for the needy. (The author deemed "blue suits as synonymous with Sunday, a day of relentless adult supervision when our spirit broke quietly in the Museum of Natural History.")



And the [baseball players holding musical instruments](#), from 1947? “The Yankees are going to sponsor a symphony program on the radio next season in order to get more ladies interested in baseball.” Meanwhile, a 1939 spot of someone filming a cowboy and a top-hatted fat cat first illustrated [a piece](#) about Presidential candidates who wanted movies made about them. Our columnist’s counterpoint: “This country loves dull Presidents, who give it a certain feeling of security and repose.” Here’s to more ho hum. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Holiday Gifting](#)

Holiday Gifting

By Paul Rudnick

December 15, 2025



I'm Aileen Varsity-Spaunders, but you probably know me from my often remaindered coffee-table books, "Entertaining with the Money from Your First Annulment," "Elegant Dining with Wealthy Strangers," and my own favorite, "Weddings Without Permits in Public Atriums."

As a noted tastemaker and hospitality authority—and I like to remind people that the word derives from the Latin root "hospital"—I've compiled my annual holiday gift guide, and I'm using the word "holiday" here so that my tax person will feel included.

Here are this year's gifting tips:

A human hand. Through my contacts at local cemeteries, I like to recycle body parts for and sometimes from my closest friends. Why not cauterize a severed hand, add some just-for-fun cocktail rings, and then shatter the hand's rigid bones with a hammer or mallet, which will allow the fingers to

be wrapped around a colorful ceramic mug with a holly or mistletoe motif? Drop a packet of hot-cocoa mix into the mug, along with a decorated toenail, and place under some lucky person's tree, although best to avoid recipients with hungry pets.

An unwanted adult child. My forty-one-year-old daughter, Andrea, has never quite "found herself," despite careers as a flight-attendant impersonator, a sales rep for recreational fentanyl, and a clown at the birthday parties of children from broken homes. (Andrea would hiss, "Tell me about it," and then squirt the tykes with vodka from a water pistol.) So this year I'm thinking, Why not weave a festive bow into Andrea's hair and give her to just about anyone with a guest room or basement crawl space?

A book repurposed as a HomeGoods decorative element. Remove any volume from the shelves of your local public library, bring it home hidden under your coat, and glue all the pages together. Then drill a hole in the book's cover large enough to hold a flickering taper, a toothbrush, or a rolled-up subpoena. An unreadable book gives the appearance that you're a literary person but without all the hassle; sometimes I fill an entire sideboard with the collected Charles Dickens, rethought as candy dishes and caddies for discarded syringes.

Expired canned goods. Find seasonal favorites buried deep in your pantry or that of an out-of-town neighbor, obscure the expiration dates with a Sharpie, and sponge off any leakage. Then gift wrap the can and leave it in a random mailbox with a shattered Christmas ornament and a bottle of Tums. The faces of youngsters will glow as they exclaim, "Look, Mommy, Santa gave us horseradish!"

A nonworking appliance. Rather than going through the arduous headache of returning, say, a sparking microwave or a cracked humidifier, place the faulty object in its original packaging, festoon it with a cluster of plastic bayberries, and tell the first person you see at an office party, "I know this is expensive, but I thought of you, and I just couldn't help myself." If the person practices some obscure foreign religion, assure him or her, "A Waterpik with a missing nozzle is a traditional and popular American gift—so enough about Buddha."

A “mystery gift.” I like to swathe an empty shoebox in candy-cane-striped foil, and, after the package is opened, call the police and report the robbery of a priceless diamond bracelet. Or put a cheap ticking clock in a gold-toned gift bag and scream at a family member to submerge it in water. It’s also jolly to take a tin filled with Danish butter cookies, gobble them down yourself, and leave a note in the tin reading “No one will tell you this, but stop eating cookies.” Sign the attached card with a hand-drawn wreath and the name of the recipient’s spouse. ♦

Fiction

- [Risk, Discipline](#)

Fiction

Risk, Discipline

By Andrew Martin

December 14, 2025



When Violet and I finally decided to get married, I was in the middle of a depression so deep it had developed into something more like psychosis. I felt like I was pretending to be myself. I don't mean I was playing "the role" of the husband-to-be, the good son, the whatever. I mean I was going around thinking, What would I do right now if I were Malcolm?

I didn't feel like myself, but I wasn't inhabiting—I don't know—a persona or anything. I was a glitchy, mutating thing, a vague C.G.I. blur from the last act of a late-nineties blockbuster. I felt like multiple selves at once and also like maybe I didn't exist.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

We were hungry for joy. "Joy" was not the kind of word either of us had used unironically in the past, but some of our irony had been scoured off by loneliness and terror. We were having trouble being funny, except in abrupt,

gallowsy ways. Violet's emergency medical instructions, taped to the refrigerator in March, included a funeral "do not play" list that was just "Livin' on a Prayer," "Takin' Care of Business," and "any version, rendition, or interpolation of 'Forever Young.'" It was offensive at that time to aspire to happiness, at least out loud, but people still seemed O.K. with the abstract idea of joy, as long as it was private, temporary. Fugitive.

We weren't capable of being all that happy, anyway. It was December. We were in the city. Over the past year, many of Violet's patients had died, were still dying. We did not wear sweatpants or binge anything besides alcohol. We weren't allowed in anybody's "pod," because Violet was a hospital physician with a consequently high risk of exposure. So we worked and we worried and we walked. We saw our friends in the park sometimes, six feet apart in the spring but creeping closer over time until we were practically on top of one another, desperate for proximity. We saw our parents on their porches, wore masks when we went inside, peed on their lawns when case counts were bad. We made and saved money by working all the time and not going anywhere and by investing in stocks that profited from the world's pain.

The classes I taught weren't helping with my despair. My little window in the corner of the screen looked like a lesser Morandi painting, the blobby brown bottle of me against a thick beige background. I always looked farther away than the people I was talking to. Filling the screen with my gigantic face did not improve matters.

It was a hard time for knowing whether one was experiencing a psychiatric event or responding normally to what was happening. Violet, indefatigable through the most desperate early months, had started showing signs of exhaustion in June, when she was charged with simultaneously starting a long-*COVID* recovery unit and a *COVID* hospice service. I became concerned when she started complaining about a dying patient's "entitled attitude."

On the Saturday the election was finally called, we briefly danced in the street to marching-band covers of songs from the seventies. Cases went up. One rainy night in late November, we ate takeout jerk chicken in our friend Kenny's apartment with all the windows open, in our coats, because he was

moving out of the city forever in the morning and it was my birthday. When we got home, Violet tied me to the bed and brought out all the stuff, but gave up when I couldn't stop sobbing.

We were afraid of each other and even more afraid of ourselves. I wanted to exist in other times. I wanted to be a footloose, promiscuous woman in the early two-thousands. I wanted to just be sick already, or on a goat farm in New Zealand, or dead.

So why not get married?

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Andrew Martin read "Risk, Discipline."](#)

I didn't have strong objections to our specific marriage. The institution is politically objectionable, of course, and intellectually bankrupt. And it did seem absurd to me, given my current emotional and/or psychiatric disposition, that I was allowed to consent to such a thing as being legally committed to another person. But I also knew, in some squirming, buried part of my brain, that being married to Violet was what past-me, and probably future-me, assuming I eventually returned to myself, would want.

In sex, at least, we'd got closer to some kind of mutuality, taking turns wielding authority over each other, allowing whole days and nights to become wide-ranging Stanford prison experiments. We both preferred being compliant to giving instruction, but I found things to enjoy about both. Taking turns being in charge seemed like good practice for our future together, and for our professional lives, too. To wit: even if it was easier to simply let the world have its way with you—getting stiffed on predatory adjunct contracts, enduring the condescension of older male doctors—it was worth remembering that other people might share the impulse to be put in their place, might even accept you demanding centrality if it gave them the chance to perform submission.

Well. On further reflection, reluctantly tying up your partner and summoning the courage to ask your boss for a raise might not have very much in common.

Because of the plague, the marriage bureaus in the city were all closed. You could do the license part by video easily enough, but city clerks were booked through January for the virtual ceremonies, and we didn't want to wait. We had been to many weddings where friends had empowered other friends to say the special words, but we were opposed to doing this, for reasons we couldn't articulate. Our weird parents, or maybe just the Catholic upbringings we'd endured at their behest, had given us a fetish for institutional legitimacy. Violet would have liked a church wedding, even in an empty church, but almost as soon as we started dating I told her that such a thing was never going to happen. It felt politically commendable at the time to have everything handled by the state, to receive the same mediocre treatment as everybody else.

And so, to obtain the bureaucratic indifference I desired, we had to travel upstate, to the land of the custom and the rustic. We chose a town where we were able to find a relatively cheap rental house and a clerk available to marry us in two weeks, when Violet had a few days off. Despite our best efforts, we were going to be, in the end, two more thirtysomethings from Brooklyn getting married in the Hudson Valley.

"Are you sure you're O.K. with all this?" Violet said, as we filled out the marriage-license application online.

"I think so," I said. I tried to think of the things one was supposed to think about when getting married. "Oh, do we know what are, like, the money laws in New York? With marriage? Like . . . do we get each other's money if we get divorced or die and all that?"

"I guess so," she said. "I mean, in some capacity, probably. That sounds good to me."

"Which part?"

"Oh, just . . . I don't know, that we just kind of get each other's stuff. Like, now—and later. Are you going to be a jerk if we have to get divorced?"

"Not any more than I already am," I said. "Maybe if you did something really bad I would . . . I don't know . . . be very mad at you, I'm sure. But

I'm not going to demand your *money*. That doesn't seem right."



"Right, that's how I feel. We'll just figure it out like regular people."

"I'm sure I'm going to die before we can get divorced, anyway," I said.

"Cool. Love that," she said.

Our parents were not thrilled that there would be no wedding for them to cry at, but we had conditioned them to have very low expectations, having been together for five years and refused even to discuss marriage before now. They probably would have bet on "break up in a sea of recrimination" over "randomly elope during a horrifying wave of illness," but it was good to keep them on their toes. We promised to FaceTime them before and afterward, and said that we'd all have some champagne and celebrate together "when it was safe."

I worried, of course, that I was going to bring Violet down. Her parents worried about that, too, because she was, objectively, great, and also their precious only daughter, which was still a thing in some quarters. My parents worried about what would happen to me if we broke up. They'd urged me to propose since the day after we met. Her miraculous attachment to me had persisted, and I was never, ever going to do better.

From a certain angle, though, I wasn't so bad. I'd managed to write and publish a novel. Violet's parents had graciously chosen not to read it, which had spared us all a few embarrassing conversations, but their abstention had also deprived me of a cathartic victory over them for not believing in me. My father expressed a generalized pride. My mother ventured that she wished there wasn't quite so much drug use and bad language, but she was pleased she'd been able to solve the mystery at a satisfying point in the narrative, before it was revealed. (It was the headmaster.)

Now, when I managed to write, I felt like an archeologist working on a minor site, excavating the past just to keep busy. I wrote about the people I knew, had known. I tried to tell myself that what I was writing would make some kind of sense eventually, given the times, the state of things. Maybe the traditional novel was dead. Maybe I would help kill it! My students did not think the traditional novel was dead, and I did not work very hard to convince them otherwise. The traditional novel would probably always be with us, like Republicans.

That year, we'd spent a lot of time with Patrick and Jocelyn, a couple who lived down the street from us, sane, decent people with whom we shared tastes and an outlook on life, though they generally seemed much more . . . "settled" is the word, I suppose, than we were. They had a generously proportioned stoop and access to the building's back yard, so we passed many hours together outside, in all kinds of weather, drinking heavy beers and worrying.

Patrick and Jocelyn talked openly to us about their dissatisfactions with each other, their conflicts with their parents, their worries about their careers, and they did so in a way that didn't feel burdensome. Rather, these subjects were presented as interesting conversational gambits, giving them the opportunity to riff and expand on certain preset themes, as if they were podcast hosts. Being around them loosened us up, though we couldn't quite shed our deep-seated aversion to sharing our actual feelings out loud. We saved that for passive-aggressive text messages.

We invited them to come upstate with us for the weekend and bear witness, and at first they enthusiastically agreed. But hesitation quickly crept in as we tried to make plans. They were supposed to see their parents the week after

and didn't want to infect them; cases were going up again; Jocelyn had an unspecified medical condition (the severity of which fluctuated with the news) that put her at particular risk. Maybe they could just drive up for the afternoon, toast us outside, and then go back to the city? The kindest thing to do was to gently disinvite them, telling a white lie about other friends who lived closer "feeling left out." Would they be terribly upset if we celebrated with them when we got back, instead? This probably saved the friendship.

We felt sheepish about asking other, similarly cautious city friends. We thought about some combination of our siblings, but we had six between us, and we knew it would make our parents feel even more neglected if we chose some favored assortment over them. Then I thought of Grant and Chelsea. They were, fundamentally, both game and chill. They had moved upstate three years ago—not terribly close to where we were getting married, but still—and we'd seen them only sporadically since then. Grant and I had gone to college together, and we texted frequently, mostly about books and movies and, incidentally, our lives. He liked things that I liked, though he leaned a bit toward the normie end of the spectrum: handsomely made, widely released movies by Tarantino, Lynch, and Nolan; somewhat unfashionable New Journalists like Mailer and Wolfe; and the more theatrical members of the alternative-music canon (Nick Cave, Tom Waits). He made his money as a remote I.T. specialist (I did not ask questions), but he was also the co-owner of a small craft distillery called Blind Love Spirits, natch.

Chelsea was more of a wild card, a sculptor who specialized in small molded-plastic figurines engaged in hardcore, sometimes physically impossible sex acts. These had the look of action figures from children's cartoons, except they were often naked or decked out in fetish gear and contorted into alternately abject and dominant positions. In the time I'd known her, these pieces had gone from being an eyebrow-raising hobby to a full-time career. At an exhibition of hers that Violet and I had attended years before, Chelsea had greeted us with a gag in her mouth and her hands cuffed behind her back, in the company of a very tall woman in a pink latex dress. "What do you say?" her minder said, tugging Chelsea's hair, and Chelsea sputtered something that sounded like "Thank you for coming," before giving a curtsy and being led away. The action figures—some photographed, some painted, some there in the plastic flesh—did their things, and halfway

through the evening Chelsea was uncuffed and “allowed” to serve us drinks on a metal tray. It was impossible for me to tell whether any of this made for good art or was just very hot as an over-all situation. Chelsea, when not in artist mode, was quiet and even shy, a dichotomous phenomenon I’d encountered in performers often enough that I didn’t find it all that surprising. She was slight, with very long blond hair and unremarkable features that were transformed when “in character” by heavy mascara, eyeliner, and black or blood-red lipstick. Grant presented as a generally vanilla person, but surely there was something more going on under the surface, given that he was with her.

Violet didn’t know whether she wanted this unlikely pair to be our only wedding guests, but I was energized by the possible infusion of chaos. We always had fun with them, I reminded her. They’d given us just the right amount of acid at that experimental-music festival. Grant was a good cook, and he would bring us nice booze from his distillery. They would serve as a kind of carbon offset to our participation in an insidious bourgeois institution. Sure, they weren’t our “best friends,” but so what? The apparent randomness of their selection would make our actual best friends, who lived in Seattle and Virginia, feel less excluded—clearly, they would understand, there were other criteria at work besides all-time belovedness. Violet, probably because I hadn’t been this animated about anything in at least a year, agreed.

I called Grant, who was down, “absolutely.” He and Chelsea were “pretty over” *COVID*. They didn’t not believe in it, he clarified, they just didn’t care that much about getting it. I wondered whether I should mention this to Violet, but it was, in truth, closer to her own perspective on the situation than mine. It wasn’t that she didn’t care but rather that she was tired of worrying and talking about it, having spent the past nine and a half months doing so. I had more anxiety, most of it centered on the fairly nebulous idea of “getting other people sick,” but I was easily swayed by the confidence of others.

We started north on Friday morning. I’d found a binder full of CDs that I’d been carting around the country since I was sixteen. “We’ll listen to these in the car!” I said. “Maybe the house will have a CD player!” Making an abrupt life-altering decision was giving me a major infusion of energy. We

should have got married years ago! Violet had cut my hair, ineptly but with great enthusiasm, a month earlier, and it had grown out enough that it now looked almost normal. She hadn't had a haircut of any kind since February, but I liked the added length. She looked like a member of Bon Jovi before they got big or of the Replacements after they did.

Stuck in traffic in upper Manhattan, I grew restless with my collection of high-school-era emo and switched to the radio. We heard the end of Bob Dylan's "Gates of Eden," followed, without commentary, by "Mississippi" and then by "Blind Willie McTell."

"Wait, did Dylan die?" I said. "Check your phone. We can't get married if Dylan died."

"Seriously?" she said. "You don't really mean that."

"Just check. I don't know if I mean it or not yet."

"I'm not going to check if you actually mean that. I won't seal my own fate."

"Would you actually still want to? Wouldn't that cast a shadow over everything?"

"There's already a shadow over everything. What's one more shadow? Brittany Murphy died on the day of Carla's wedding."

"Right, and they got divorced. Please just check. I'm really worried."

The radio was playing "I Want You." Less death-haunted than the others, but there was still that line about the undertaker.

"There's no indication on the internet that he died," she said. "Maybe it's his birthday?"

"His birthday's in May," I said.

"Well, it sounds like someone is just playing your favorite recording artist on your favorite radio station. Seems like a good sign to me."

It seemed, to me, like a trap. All my enthusiasm for the trip was gone. What were we doing? There was no way it could ever be a good sign to hear “Mississippi” on the radio.

Eventually, the d.j. came on the air—not the regular Friday-morning d.j., I noted, some fill-in—and explained that she “just felt like hearing some Bob on this beautiful, sunny December day. Don’t worry, he is A-O.K., as far as I know, at least, but thank you for all of your concerned calls and messages.”

“Well, at least I wasn’t the only one who was worried,” I said.

“Are you really that nervous?” Violet said. “I don’t want to feel like I’m making you do something.”

“I just want to reserve the right to respect signs and portents,” I said. “This is how people have decided things since the dawn of time.”

“Well, I think we can also make decisions based on what we actually want to do.”

We listened to the radio until we lost reception, then switched to a podcast about the runoffs in Georgia. If we’d lost the Presidential election, I realized suddenly, there was no way we’d be getting married now.

The farther we got from the city, the better I felt. Like everyone who has ever lived in New York, every time we drove even an hour north, we started imagining how much happier and calmer we’d be if we lived upstate. And every time we returned we felt immediate relief to be back among the sirens and the floridly insane.

The house we’d rented was, typically, much closer to the road than it appeared in the listing but otherwise moderately charming and lived-in, which placed it above many of the barely decorated, instructions-festooned places we’d booked in the past. This one did have two troubling paintings, in the kitchen and living room, of dogs with sexy human-lady bodies, or perhaps they were sexy human ladies with dog heads. But there was also a working turntable with at least a couple of listenable records (“Something

Else by the Kinks,” an intriguing late-seventies Grace Jones) and a “welcome” bottle of wine. So, on the whole, a win.

We went upstairs and Violet fucked me forcefully in the small, undecorated bedroom there. An hour of that and we both felt secure in ourselves again, ready to take on the project of being legally bound.

Grant and Chelsea were due at four, so we showered and tried to look like people who sometimes interacted socially with others. Violet was better at this than I was. I needed to shave but couldn’t summon the mental strength such an act would require. Violet assured me my beard looked fine, but I could tell she didn’t really think so. This was a problem that we had sometimes, my not believing what she said, despite her insistence. Sometimes this was because she said the opposite of what she actually thought.

Twenty minutes past their expected arrival time, I heard tires on the gravel driveway. I went out to the front porch and waved like an imbecile, to indicate excitement. Chelsea emerged from the driver’s seat, unsmiling in black sunglasses, a leather jacket, and a spiked dog collar. Grant came out from the passenger seat, lugubrious at first, then putting on a showy grin through his beard when he saw my own exaggerated enthusiasm. He was dressed in an almost militantly preppy way—a gray blazer, partially unbuttoned pink shirt, boat shoes with no socks. The weather was unusually—or maybe not so unusually, now—mild for December, but still. Maybe this was just his idea of “wedding casual.” He slung a couple of bags over his shoulders while Chelsea removed a small cardboard box from the back seat.

“Can I give you a hug?” Grant said, inches from my face.



“Oh, I suppose!” I said, and embraced him.

“Hey, dude,” Chelsea said. “Congratulations on everything.”

She gave me a tight squeeze with her free arm and then handed me the box.

“It’s Gwyneth Paltrow’s head,” she said.

“Surprisingly light!”

“Yeah, it just has some goop in it or whatever her thing is called.”

“You know it’s goop,” Grant said.

“I’ll open it inside,” I said.

Once in the house, I was momentarily overwhelmed. I’d been in domestic spaces with other people so rarely in the past year that Grant and Chelsea’s bodies seemed huge, their faces and gestures hyperreal. I felt crowded but also comforted. People! These were people. Inside the box was a tiny store-bought cake, with “Congratulations” written in shaky minuscule script.

“Aw, you guys,” Violet said. “Was the drive O.K.?”

“Sure, when I was driving,” Chelsea said. “When I was allowed to drive.”

“Right, I was imposing Sharia law,” Grant said.

“No, you were just being really aggressive about controlling the vehicle, with no clear reason for it.”

“I just thought that maybe since you were very, very stoned and I was not, it would make more sense for me to ‘control the vehicle.’ In your totally normal words.”

I didn’t offer an opinion on the matter. I always preferred for Violet to drive when I’d been drinking or drugging even a little bit, and occasionally she was annoyed by this, thinking I was using a minor technicality to avoid a task I didn’t like doing regardless of my chemical consumption. But I was a bad enough driver that it really was best to play the margins.

“Let’s have some champagne,” Violet said. “No more travelling for a while.”

We showed them to their room on the first floor—spartan, yes, but this wasn’t a luxury wellness retreat—then opened one of the expensive bottles my father had had delivered to our apartment door. Fancy champagne was his default response to life news, a habit I certainly appreciated, even though I could hardly tell André from the decent stuff. But who doesn’t like expensive things?

To that end, Chelsea produced some cocaine, which she dubiously referred to as her “dowry,” and, though it was not our drug of choice, we did a couple of lines, Violet skimming hers so lightly as to be mostly gestural. Depression, it was dawning on me, might simply be the absence of champagne and drugs, and friendly acquaintances with whom to share them. It soon became apparent that no one would be cooking, so we had a forbidding number of mediocre pizzas delivered, of which we collectively ate about a half-dozen slices. We needed to save room for other things.

“Honestly, I was pretty surprised when you said you were getting married,” Grant said, leaning back on the couch.

“We’ve been together for many years,” I said.

“Exactly. I thought you’d just ride it out, keep things a little ambiguous.”

“I can’t remember,” Violet said. “Are you guys married?”

“For the insurance,” Chelsea said. “But we’re not ‘married’ married.”

“She’s married to the scene,” Grant said.

“I’d say more like ‘devoted to the community,’ ” Chelsea said.

“You mean art?” Violet said.

“Art, kink, the intersection. It’s all very, you know, involved. Physically, emotionally. Grant’s into it but not in, like, an official capacity, so he has to let me go where I need to go. So classic-formula marriage is kind of out.”

“You guys are kind of kinky, right?” Grant said.

I couldn’t remember what I’d told him. I’d probably been trying to seem like less of a square after one of Chelsea’s events, and disclosed more than I should have about our sporadic pegging and bondage sessions. Violet was hardly a prude, but she tended to prefer that the details of our sex life—our intimate life in general—be parcelled out at her discretion.

“We do our best,” Violet said, without evident distress. “Wouldn’t want to claim any stolen valor. And it’s all pretty monogamous. You’re putting in the real work.”

Chelsea nodded vigorously, took a sip of champagne.

“It is work, really—not the activity, that’s the fun part, but the staying open, staying sensitive to what you want and need. It’s discipline but also the opposite of discipline, you know? Because, if it becomes routine, then what’s the fucking point? You might as well be pushing a stroller in Park Slope.”

This was, of course, more or less our assumed end point, regardless of whether or not we “wanted” it.

“So how do you stay open?” Violet said.

“Risk?” Grant said after a pause.

“Yes,” Chelsea said. “You have to not be afraid of losing things.”

This shouldn’t have been profound—there was nothing original about the idea—but, in that particular moment, I understood that it was true. I was afraid, yes. I endured, through my unhappiness and through historical disruption, and I took pride in that, but I had not actually risked anything besides, arguably, through sheer physical inactivity and alcohol consumption, my health. Everything I did, artistically and romantically and otherwise, was oriented around simply not losing what I already had.

“And how do you do that?” I said.

Chelsea stared deep into my eyes for a moment, then laughed. “That’s what separates the champs from the tramps, boyo!”

She rummaged through her oversized purse, all traces of her earlier annoyance gone. “Another very small line, perhaps? Because marriage?”



I shrugged a “Why not?” as Violet shook her head. I knew this was not the kind of risk we were talking about. Doing semi-hard drugs when offered them was not, as I sometimes allowed myself to fantasize, showing up on a leash in a leather dress to a sex rave, or finding out where the nearest sex rave was, or even shyly asking someone whether sex raves really existed. Someone else’s cocaine was a pretty good synecdoche for all the non-life-expanding risks I’d been taking my whole life. But: it was what was available.

We drained the good champagne and a much cheaper bottle that Chelsea and Grant had brought. We had some beer and whiskey in the kitchen, and a special “rare batch” of Grant’s distillery’s bourbon, but we were going to have to replenish our supply soon if we kept up this pace. The session with the justice of the peace wasn’t until the next afternoon.

Chelsea told us about a video project she was working on, a kind of updated, role-reversed riff on the old Vito Acconci thing, in this case with Chelsea tied up under the floorboards and visitors encouraged to masturbate in the gallery space to a live video feed of her. She wasn’t sure whether she was reclaiming power or “ceding the last of it,” she said.

Violet, after listening to this, became uncharacteristically candid about her desire for “a less mediated sexual existence,” arguing, with somewhat wandering logic, that there was no reason this shouldn’t be compatible with “a classic marriage.”

“There can’t be good sex without secrets,” she concluded. “And marriage is all about secrets.”

It was the first time she’d said that, though it wasn’t an inaccurate read of our relationship. Maybe she was fucking around with her co-worker Akhil, or somebody new, on her phone again. I didn’t mind what I didn’t know, really, but, now that she’d said that, it wasn’t really a secret.

“I used to think that,” Chelsea said. “But now I wonder if it’s kind of reactionary. Like, the most radical position is just total honesty, right? Why should you have to hide? It just abets the people who want to cover up actually fucked-up shit and make it seem cool and transgressive.”

Violet's eyes were wide with attention, which I knew meant she disagreed completely.

"I guess I'm not interested in policing people's relationships," she said.

Chelsea rolled her eyes.

"I got my ass kicked in June for screaming in a cop's face," she said. "Fuck the police. Hard."

Violet cackled, and the tension broke. She'd already had more to drink than usual, by quite a lot, and I'd worried things were going to get ugly. But she just nuzzled up to me gently as Grant described the laborious process of getting his liquor into various stores and bars. When talk of another round started up, she declared that she was going to bed.

"Don't stay up all night, boychik," she said to me. "You gotta be at least a little bit lucid for the legalities."

"Oh, I'll be sharp as a button," I said. "Of that you can be sure."

"Hmm," she said. "Chelsea, you're in charge. I'm not saying no more cocaine and alcohol, but . . . use your judgment."

"Yes, mistress," Chelsea said. When we heard her door close, Chelsea silently set out three more thin lines, which we handled with professional efficiency, and Grant replenished our glasses with bourbon.

"So," Chelsea said. She fixed her significant blue eyes on me.

"Malcolm. What is it you actually want."

"What's that?"

"Why did you invite us here? For your wedding. What exactly is it that you're trying to get out of this?"

I turned to Grant, hoping he might give me a hint as to what to do, but he just raised his eyebrows, implicitly echoing her questions.

“I like you guys?” I said. “You’re fun. You’re reliable. I knew you wouldn’t make an undue fuss about things.”

“We’re fun,” Chelsea said, deadpan. “What makes us fun?”

I shifted in my seat. The dog-woman painting stared down at me in judgment.

“Well, you, uh, are very generous with your substances, obviously. And you’re, you know . . . liberated. Open to possibilities. Like you were saying earlier.”

“Yes, exactly,” Chelsea said. “It’s about sex. That’s what we represent to you. Or what I do, at least. So. What do you want?”

I was too fucked up for this line of questioning.

“You mean . . . now?”

She cracked up, then covered her mouth with the back of her hand. I hadn’t realized how crooked her bottom teeth were until she did that.

“Yeah, like, ‘You want one last premarital threesome before you take the plunge?’ No, dude, I mean, I feel like when you get fucked up you’re always trying to tell us in these oblique ways that you’re a freak. I don’t think you’re just being prurient. But I think you’re kind of afraid, or embarrassed, and hoping I’m going to give you some kind of dispensation or something.”

“O.K.”

“Am I on to something?”

“Maybe. But I think you could say that about anybody.”

“Why are you getting married?”

She had a not-unkind smirk on her face, echoed, apologetically, it seemed to me, by Grant. I didn’t find it as rude as I might have. I believed she was sincerely curious, which counts for a lot, and I’d also hardly been indoors

unmasked with anyone besides Violet in months. It would have taken a lot for me to shut down a conversation.

“Devotion?” I said.

“Sure.”

“Violet wants joy.”

“Ah. And are you feeling joy?”

“I mean, as much as I ever do. Do you have, I don’t know, some advice or something?”



“I just wonder why you don’t try to get whatever it is you want. Like, why you don’t do what would make you happy.”

“What, so you’re a therapist?”

“Everybody’s a therapist now, bro. Especially after this many drinks. Come on, drink with me, think with me.”

She poured all three of us another slug of whiskey and motioned for me to drink up. She left hers untouched. Grant hadn't said a word in what felt like an hour. This was the Chelsea show, and it was apparently on until closing time.

"Look, shit can get pretty weird in the context of a long-term monogamous relationship, for sure," Chelsea said. "Or so they say. I think things have been way more exciting for us"—Grant nodded enthusiastically—"when we've been willing to be more, like, *out* with our desires and interests."

She caught Grant's eye. There was a brief pause before he snapped his fingers crisply. She immediately got up from her chair and sat cross-legged on the floor at Grant's feet, her hands on her knees, facing forward.

"She can be really well behaved," Grant said. "She just needs rules."

"Oh," I said.

Chelsea maintained a neutral expression, but I could see the hint of a smile in her eyes, which were studiously not meeting mine.

"She likes to be out of commission sometimes. It gives her a chance to reflect, to want things. It's good for her. Definitely good for me."

"This is, like, your party trick?" I said.

He shrugged.

"We're both really evangelical about not repressing things. We've had a lot of time this year to get the dynamic right. Life doesn't have to be so hard."

"Everything in the world is going to hell," I said.

"Yes. So we're seizing the opportunity to be happy while we still can."

He turned his gaze to Chelsea, who was sitting perfectly still with her hands on her knees, waiting for further instruction. She did indeed look happy. Beatific, even.

“Isn’t that right, baby doll?” Grant said.

She gave a shiver of a nod, stared straight ahead.

“Hey, do you want to kiss her?” Grant said. “That’s allowed, on our side at least. Chelsea’s always thought you were cute.”

“Really?” I said. Chelsea widened her eyes slightly, raised her eyebrows. Risk, right. But still.

“What if I just . . .” I said. “Would it be O.K. if I just, um, gently ran my hand through your hair a little bit instead, Chels? I think that might be more where I’m at right now.”

She shifted her attention to Grant in query.

“Sure,” Grant said. “I don’t see why not. That seems like a very nice thing to do.”

I sank to the floor and got on my knees facing her. At this distance, I could see how thick her makeup was, and I caught a sharp hint of her garlic-and-peppermint smell, surprisingly hippieish, given the punk vibes. Now that I was here, I wished I had accepted the offer to kiss her, but it felt too late to change my mind. I lifted my hand and registered a minute flinch, terrible and intimate, from which she quickly recovered. She closed her eyes, and I gently ran my hand over the back of her skull. Her hair was thin and feathery and dry. She leaned her head back into my hand like a cat, and I felt, or imagined, her body vibrating in a light purr. When I reached the bottom of her mane, I rested my hand softly on her back. I could have sworn I felt her heartbeat.

I stumbled off to bed a half hour later, after we’d shared a skinny spliff to settle ourselves. Grant held the joint for Chelsea, who remained silent and still, and instructed her on her intake and exhale. When I told them I needed to sleep, Grant promised that they’d clean up before they went to bed. When I glanced back, I saw Chelsea gathering the bottles in her arms while Grant remained seated, watching her.

In the bedroom, I was surprised to find the bedside lamp still on and Violet with her eyes closed but, to my trained eye, not asleep.

“What’s up?” I said.

She didn’t respond, so I sat down on the edge of the bed and put my hand on her hip. “Did you hear all that?”

“What?” she said. “Oh, no. I couldn’t really hear you. I mean, I heard voices but not words. Was there drama?”

No good sex without secrets.

“Just more of the same,” I said. “Have you been up this whole time?”

“On and off,” she said. She sat up against the headboard and slid gently away from me. “Just thinking. Overthinking.”

I was afraid to say it out loud but forced myself to do it. “Are you having . . . second thoughts?” I said.

“No!” she said. It sounded genuine. “I mean, I don’t think so. Not about us, at least. But I think . . . I don’t know.”

“What? Tell me.”

She put her head in her hands and didn’t say anything for a long moment.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about this,” she said softly into her hands, “and I just . . . I don’t think I want to be a doctor right now. I’m really, really tired, and I don’t think I can keep doing it. I’m so sick of all of it. But we need the money. And the hospital definitely needs people. So. I feel really stuck.”

I experienced the most significant surge of joy—actual joy—I’d felt since long before the pandemic started. It was relief, but it was more than that. It was a way forward.

“Oh, God,” I said. “You’ve done your part.”

She shook her head. “It’s cowardly. I know I’m just burned out. And we’d be so broke. How would we be able to afford a kid?”



We had not, officially, decided we were going to have a kid. Or had we?

“Lots of non-doctors manage to have kids, somehow,” I said.

“Not ones with six-figure medical-school debt.”

I paused, trying to determine the correct angle of approach. It was true that I would not be of significant help paying down her debt—our debt, probably, after tomorrow, once we looked into how the money thing worked—anytime soon. A lot seemed to depend on my response.

“I know I haven’t been good at making money,” I said. “Or saving money. Anything to do with money. But I want to be. Some people liked my book. Regular people. Maybe it should be a series. I’ll write another one. A trilogy! People fucking love trilogies. And we can, um, budget. I’ll buy fewer books. And drinks.”

She sighed, but there was a softening in her face. Her jaw unclenched, at least a little bit.

“I know you want to do all those things,” she said. “That’s not the problem.”

I got in the bed, and we curled up into each other.

“Maybe I just need a break,” she said. “A sabbatical.”

“You know what gets you a paid sabbatical,” I mumbled into her hair.

“Right,” Violet said. “The government says I get a baby vacation!”

She turned to face me and touched my cheek gently, something I could not remember her ever having done before.

“I know you’re miserable,” she said. “I think it’s going to get better once I figure out my shit.”

It somehow came as a surprise that she knew how unhappy I was. Or rather, since I was always unhappy, I thought I had successfully disguised the fact that I was currently more unhappy than usual. But maybe I was not, contrary to my recent assumptions, invisible.

“Maybe we should stick together and also change everything about our lives,” I said. “Chelsea and Grant had some good ideas.”

“Oh?” she said.

“Risk,” I said. “And discipline.”

“Right. Which comes first?”

“Well. Whichever you want.”

“You want me to be more like Chelsea?” Violet said.

“You know I want to be the Chelsea,” I said.

“Hmm,” she said. “Maybe once you bring in that money you’ve been talking about.”

I knew she didn't think I was serious, but I was. I could do it, I thought. Or, well. Either that or we'd get divorced.

In all the pictures from the twenty-minute marriage ceremony, you can see a bright-green exit sign and a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall—such, I suppose, are the perils of municipal regulations. The light in the town hall was dim, but at least it was an old building, with lots of polished wood everywhere. My jacket was wrinkled, my hair a mess, but Violet looked fantastic in the distinctly nontraditional yellow sweater dress she'd insisted on wearing, and I managed to get a few good shots of her outside, on her own, holding some expensive flowers we'd bought in Hudson. The justice of the peace, a tall, bald, white-bearded man named Clive, performed his duties with kindness and efficiency, and he let the two of us take our masks off for the ceremony. We each said a few heartfelt sentences, Violet's much more articulate than mine. It's possible that I am capable of being sincere only extemporaneously. Whatever I said was true, but I'm also glad it wasn't recorded for posterity. In the pictures, Grant is wearing a well-cut navy suit, Chelsea a revealing white (*Chelsea!*) lace thing that looks like expensive French underwear. You can't make out the ball gag under Chelsea's face mask, unless you know to look. ♦

This is drawn from “[Down Time](#).”

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Books

Stephen Sondheim, Puzzle Maestro

For the late Broadway composer, crafting crosswords and treasure hunts was as thrilling as writing musicals.

By Michael Schulman

December 15, 2025



On Halloween night, 1968, a flock of twenty eminent New Yorkers burst out of the door of Stephen Sondheim's Turtle Bay town house. The group included the Broadway producer Harold Prince, the playwright Arthur Laurents, the composer Mary Rodgers, and the actors Lee Remick and Roddy McDowall. Divided into teams of five, the guests filed into four limousines. They'd been given maps of the city, and objects including string, pins, and scissors, as well as a piece of advice. "Keep talking to each other," their host had told them. "Do not try to solve these things individually." Sondheim, at thirty-eight, had already written the lyrics for "West Side Story" and "Gypsy," but he had not yet revolutionized the American musical with his dense, urbane scores for "Company," "Follies," and "A Little Night Music." In the meantime, he was plying one of his lesser-known talents: designing elaborate treasure hunts.

Sondheim had devised the hunt with the actor Anthony Perkins; they had met through Perkins's partner, Grover Dale, who'd been one of the Jets in "West Side Story," on Broadway. In the weeks before the hunt, Sondheim and Perkins had labored over clues. They planted envelopes around town: under a park bench, behind the pins in a bowling alley. Perkins had a cache of leftover campaign posters for Eleanor Clark French, a local politician who had run unsuccessfully for Congress a few years earlier, and the two men hung them in strategic locations, to give the players visual hints that they were on the right track.

All the clues were based on logic. Mary Rodgers later recalled driving up to a brownstone on East Seventy-third Street, where her team heard music wafting through the door. It was the opening phrase of "One for My Baby," on repeat. The lyric: "It's quarter to three, there's no one in the place . . ." The solution: 245, which matched another address on the map. At one building, players were greeted by Perkins's mother, who served them cake and tea. Someone was about to bite into the cake when a teammate spotted a clue written at the bottom of the teacup: "You can't have your cake and eat it, too." They put their cake slices together, and the solution was spelled out in icing.

The evening, which Sondheim and Perkins titled the Eleanor Clark French Memorial Treasure Hunt, became legendary. In the coming decades, Sondheim designed more treasure hunts. In 1973, when "A Little Night Music" was about to move from the Shubert to a bigger house, he and Perkins devised a farewell-to-the-Shubert hunt that sent the cast scouring the theatre, with clues based on the script. (One was "Where Petra's petticoats are." A lyric described them as "away up high," which meant that the next stop was the balcony.) There was a fax-based hunt in the eighties, for which Sondheim enlisted Stephen Fry and his fax machine, and a dinosaur-themed hunt at the American Museum of Natural History. In 1995, to raise money for the Millay Colony for the Arts, Sondheim created a hunt at a Manhattan clubhouse. At each location, players would gather scraps of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poems, which, mashed together, revealed a double acrostic: "*THE TREASURE LINGERS IN MY LOCKER*," leading the winners to a gym locker labelled "Millay."

Sondheim's last major treasure hunt was in 2013, at a birthday gala for his friend Perry Granoff. Attendees were gathered on the grand tier at New York City Center. Each team was given an envelope containing twelve brainteasers—rebuses, letter grids—that could be solved in any order, leading to sites around the theatre. As the teams puzzled, the octogenarian game master would wander by, dispensing gnomish pointers like “Think laterally.” Clue No. 8, called Perry's Confusion, was a jumble of letters, “*AAEFINNORTTUW*,” along with the hint “The first word alternates vowels and consonants and has no repeated letters.”¹ (The solutions to this and other numbered clues can be found at the end of this piece.) Clue No. 12, Perry's Favorite Shows, Except One, was a list of six Broadway musicals: “A Little Night Music,” “Cats,” “Fiorello!,” “Kiss Me, Kate,” “The Music Man,” and “South Pacific.” (“Cats,” presumably, was the show that Granoff disliked.) Players had to arrange them in chronological order and then find an acrostic using their first or last letters, read either top to bottom or bottom to top.²

At each location, participants would find a theatre ticket, which led to a seat in the house containing a letter. The first team to collect and unscramble all twelve letters uncovered the location of the grand prize: a gold box containing a T-shirt printed with Granoff's face and the words “I won the treasure.” “Are you kidding me?” one of the underwhelmed victors said, upon opening the box. The real prize, of course, was the privilege of having played.

Sondheim's death, in 2021, has occasioned a flurry of books about his life and his singular influence on musical theatre. Only Barry Joseph has zeroed in on his sideline as a puzzles-and-games enthusiast. In his clever and appropriately obsessive “Matching Minds with Sondheim: The Puzzles and Games of the Broadway Legend” (Bloomsbury), Joseph conducts a treasure hunt of his own, rummaging through memoirs and archives and surveying friends, collaborators, party planners, and jigsaw-puzzle designers to reconstruct a part of Sondheim's œuvre which was mostly confined to his social circle. “It's a whole side of me nobody knows,” Sondheim once said, though he did his best to downplay what he saw as a committed pastime. Constructing puzzles, he insisted, was “a minor form of a minor art.”

Joseph disagrees. “His puzzles and games should receive the same thoughtful consideration as his music,” he writes, while conceding that they formed “a footpath that ran along the main road of his life, one he would frequently travel.” Joseph, who designs educational games and co-founded the Games for Change Festival, is a polymath himself. His previous books include a history of seltzer, and he’s the director of something called the Brooklyn Seltzer Museum. The new book is itself a sort of puzzle box. The dedication is a word puzzle that I have yet to solve, and the back third comes with instructions on how to throw your own Sondheimian game night. Braver souls might try a parlor game called Hostilities, which Sondheim used to play with his nineteen-sixties set. Every player was given a number and slips of paper and wrote impertinent questions intended for each of the others. Example: “Who’s smarter, your spouse or your collaborator?” The slips were delivered, answered in writing, and then anonymized and thrown in a bowl. Each was then read aloud, as players guessed who had asked and answered which nosy questions. The game frequently ended in tears.

Most of the book, though, is devoted to a “ludological biography” of the great man: a life in puzzle pieces, hitherto unassembled. Sondheim may not have considered his puzzles and games to be on par with his musicals, but they open a window onto his bustling mind, one with a compulsive need to challenge itself. For years, he did crossword puzzles not in pencil or pen but in his head—the paper was left blank—and visitors reported having seen an all-white jigsaw puzzle on his coffee table. Sondheim possessed what he called a “curious and perverted ability” to scramble letters on sight. As a boy, he once walked past a movie theatre advertising Cinerama and turned to his father to remark, “Oh, those are the letters in ‘American.’”

Meryle Secrest, in her 1998 biography of Sondheim, theorized that his interest emerged from the trauma of his parents’ divorce, when he was ten—a time when, the composer said, “nothing made sense any more.” Puzzles, Secrest writes, reassured him that “a world in fragments could be reassembled, however painfully, and that a key existed to every riddle if he searched diligently enough.” Joseph sifted through Secrest’s papers, at Yale, and found the moment that Sondheim had this revelation in their interviews. “Maybe, you know, when my own world went into chaos, I spent the rest of my life trying to put the pieces together and make form out of it,” he told

her. For years, when asked about his penchant for puzzles, he'd say that they create "order out of chaos." Art, he would explain, did the same.

Just as Sondheim's parents were breaking up, he found a mentor and surrogate father in Oscar Hammerstein II, a family friend and neighbor in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. "I started chess late in life, and my teacher was an eleven-year-old boy," Hammerstein once said. "It took me three years to be able to beat him." (Sondheim had learned how to play from the husband of Hammerstein's cook.) Along with opening his protégé's mind to the theatre, Hammerstein taught Sondheim the game anagrams, in which players take turns flipping over lettered tiles and using them to form words. Later, Leonard Bernstein introduced Sondheim to a variation called cutthroat anagrams, which is more of a free-for-all: there are no turns, so anyone can snatch the new letter and make a word. Sondheim preferred this version, since it was about quickness rather than luck. Nina Bernstein, the composer's youngest child, recalled getting "thrown in with the lions." She finally triumphed in her twenties, when she spotted an "M" tile and a "B" tile and stole Sondheim's word "saturated," to form "masturbated."

In the fifties, as Sondheim was writing the lyrics to Bernstein's music for "West Side Story," he introduced the older man to cryptic crosswords, a form popular in England but little known in America. The pair had different modes of collaboration—Bernstein preferred to work in the room together, while Sondheim would rather be apart—but the cryptics that arrived every week in the British magazine *The Listener* helped bridge the divide. "We would meet on Thursday and spend the first couple of hours doing the puzzle together," Sondheim recalled, "and then would get to work." When Bernstein was turning fifty and looking for a successor at the New York Philharmonic, Sondheim created an intricate three-part board game called the Great Conductor Hunt, in which players could compete for the job. The third stage, Podium, was a three-dimensional Lucite maze with a miniature Lenny in the center, holding a baton.

Sondheim had begun designing board games in his teens. He sent an idea to Parker Brothers and then considered suing when the company put out a game—Park and Shop—that he thought copied his. When he was twenty-three, he created a board game alternately called Stardom or Camp, in which players compete to succeed in Hollywood by sleeping their way to the top—

the winner beds Norma Desmond—while affixing colored sequins to their faces. (The game was uncovered intact after his death, as his belongings were being prepared for auction.) Another, known as the Game of Hal Prince, or Producer, gamified the business of Broadway, with points allotted for good reviews and wild cards that ribbed Sondheim's contemporaries. (Jerome Robbins abandons the show to see his therapist.) Sondheim also collected antique board games; his first acquisition, a gift, was a nineteenth-century amusement called the New and Fashionable Game of the Jew, which featured an antisemitic caricature perched over gold coins. Visitors to Sondheim's Manhattan home would marvel at the game boards framed on the walls—until 1995, when the bulk of them were destroyed in a house fire.

During the sixties, when Sondheim was not yet entrenched on Broadway, his puzzler's brain seemed to be working overtime. He appeared as a celebrity contestant on TV game shows, including "Play Your Hunch" and "The Match Game." On a recently unearthed episode of "Password," from 1966, he plays opposite Lee Remick, who had starred in Sondheim's show "Anyone Can Whistle." In one round, he has to guess a secret word based on single-word clues that Remick feeds him. "Picture," she says. Sondheim, cool as a cobra, supplies the correct answer: "Etching."

In 1968, the editor Clay Felker was launching a new magazine, to be called *New York*, and he asked a mutual friend, Gloria Steinem, to see if Sondheim would oversee its puzzles page. Over a year and change, Sondheim constructed forty-two cryptic crosswords for the magazine. In the inaugural issue, he gave readers a primer. "The kind of crossword puzzle familiar to most Americans is a mechanical test of tirelessly esoteric knowledge," he wrote. A cryptic clue, in contrast, has a "cleverness, humor, even a pseudo-aphoristic grace." Each clue was a puzzle unto itself, often divided into two parts. One clue, from a Sondheim cryptic titled "Chop Logic," goes "Broken harmonicas found floating in Manhattan." ³ "Broken" implies that "harmonicas" is an anagram, and "floating in Manhattan" is a sideways description of the solution. In 1969, Sondheim quit his post at *New York* to focus on "Company," but his contributions helped popularize the form Stateside. No less an authority than Will Shortz, the crossword editor of the *Times*, considers Sondheim "the father of cryptic crosswords in America."

His most fertile ludological invention, however, may be something he called the Murder Game. He'd been rankled by the traditional party game in which one person is designated the murderer and the players have to deduce who has "killed" someone else. "The problem with most murder games," Sondheim complained, "is you have nothing to do except maybe giggle around in the dark." In 1965, he was visiting his friend Phyllis Newman, who was stuck in Detroit in a Frank Loesser musical that was about to close out of town. Sondheim asked how he could cheer her up. She said to throw her a party back in New York: "Invent a game."

Sondheim got to work at eight o'clock one night, devising a version of the murder game in which all the players would have to use their wits to untangle the mystery. When he looked up, it was around seven the next morning, and he'd done it. A group was assembled at Perkins's town house, on West Twenty-first Street. Each player drew from a deck of cards to receive a number and was then given an envelope, with individual instructions to go to a particular room and search for a clue. The murderer was told where to find a gun. By coincidence, Perkins, five years after stabbing Janet Leigh in the shower in "Psycho," wound up being the murderer—and "killed" another guest, the English playwright Peter Shaffer, in the bathroom, no less. The surviving guests then returned with their clues—photos of seemingly random objects—and had to work out who'd killed Shaffer. (Shaffer joined them after smoking two cigarettes on the bathroom floor.)

The next time Sondheim was in London, Shaffer got him to re-create the Murder Game for his brother, the writer Anthony Shaffer. In 1970, Anthony's play "Sleuth," set in a mystery writer's mansion strewn with puzzles, opened in London. The original title: "Who's Afraid of Stephen Sondheim?" Two years later, "Sleuth" became a movie starring Laurence Olivier. When Sondheim met Olivier, soon after it was shot, the actor told him, "I'm delighted to meet you. I've been playing you."

At about the same time, another Sondheim playmate, the director Herbert Ross, asked him to write a screenplay based on his Murder Game. Sondheim and Perkins collaborated on the script, which became "The Last of Sheila," a 1973 whodunnit directed by Ross and starring Raquel Welch. The film is set on a yacht cruising the Mediterranean, where the host, a producer named

Clinton Greene (James Coburn), has convened a group of acquaintances one year after his wife, Sheila, was killed in a hit-and-run. Every night, the boat docks, and the guests, each of whom harbors a dirty secret, are sent into a different port city to solve a puzzle, using clues that borrow elements of Sondheim's treasure hunts. Midway through, Clinton is bumped off at a monastery while dressed as a monk in Raquel Welch drag, and his guests must unravel the crime.

For most Sondheim fans, "The Last of Sheila" is a curio, wedged between "A Little Night Music" and "Pacific Overtures." (It's worth watching just for the performance of Dyan Cannon, as a thinly veiled version of the Hollywood agent Sue Mengers.) To Joseph, it's a glimpse of what Sondheim the puzzle maestro could do with a budget and an all-star cast. Its plot is reminiscent not only of the Murder Game but of Joseph's book: the master of ceremonies has died, and the biographer is left to sort out the clues. "Sheila" prompted one moviegoer to stage a real multi-city scavenger hunt, which inspired the 1980 film "Midnight Madness," which then inspired another real-life contest, which spawned the 1997 thriller "The Game," directed by David Fincher. And if elements of "Sheila" sound familiar—the Mediterranean isle, the enigmatic host imposing games on his guests—that's because Rian Johnson drew on "Sheila" when writing his "Knives Out" sequel "Glass Onion," for which Sondheim filmed a cameo months before his death.

Like the clue that gives away Clinton's killer, the most meaningful legacy of the Murder Game is hiding in plain sight. In "Sunday in the Park with George," Sondheim's 1984 musical, the painter Georges Seurat sings a ballad called "Finishing the Hat," about how artists become so immersed in their art that they neglect the world around them. ("There's a part of you always standing by, / Mapping out the sky.") It's often thought of as Sondheim's most confessional song, an ode to the thrill and the cost of creativity. However, it was written not about the flow state of composing but about Sondheim's experience devising the Murder Game in 1965, "trancing out" from dusk till dawn. "I had left the planet for eleven hours," he later told the radio host Terry Gross, "completely absorbed in a world of instructions, gunshots, diagrams, and clues."

What, if anything, does all this puzzling tell us about Sondheim's musicals? Joseph gets around to them in an appendix, for which he polled fans online to catalogue the games within the shows. "A Little Priest," the Act I finale of "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," from 1979, is a battle of wordplay between Sweeney and his accomplice, Mrs. Lovett, as they imagine the varieties of men they plan to bake into pies. ("Or we have some shepherd's pie peppered / With actual shepherd on top!") The first act of "Sunday in the Park with George" ends with trees, parasols, and park-goers snapping into place like jigsaw-puzzle pieces to form Seurat's masterwork "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte." "Into the Woods," written in the eighties, as Sondheim was getting into computer puzzle games, sends its heroes, a baker and his wife, on a fairy-tale scavenger hunt: to break a witch's spell, they must find such items as Little Red Riding Hood's "cape as red as blood" and Cinderella's "slipper as pure as gold."

Sondheim's final musical, "Here We Are," produced posthumously in 2023, is based on a pair of Luis Buñuel films. As Joseph observes, Act I, in which a group of bougie friends search in vain for a place to order brunch, resembles a board game. Act II, in which they find themselves in an embassy that they are mysteriously unable to leave, is akin to an escape room—a live-action gaming trend that interested Sondheim late in life, when he organized escape-room outings with friends like Mia Farrow and Bernadette Peters.

"All art—symphonies, architecture, novels—it's all puzzles," Sondheim told Stephen Schiff in this magazine, in 1993. "The fitting together of notes, the fitting together of words have by their very nature a puzzle aspect." Lyricists, like cruciverbalists, have to arrange words within a restrictive space, aligning stress and syllable and rhyme. The same mind that was constructing cryptic crosswords for *New York* was rhyming "personable" with "coercin' a bull," in "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," from "Company." Then, there's the game master's instinct to entertain—to challenge without stumping. "A bad jigsaw puzzle is where people put five pieces together and say, 'Oh, I see. It's a cow,'" he told Schiff. "You don't want everybody ahead of you all the time. Same thing with plotting a play. If the people are ahead of you, they're looking at their watches until you get to where they already are." Musicals were Rubik's Cubes to be solved: when to

cut a song, where to add a laugh. As Sondheim's frequent collaborator James Lapine said, "He loves solving why things worked and why they didn't."

Sondheim's analytical bent earned him a reputation as being cold and cerebral, but, if his musicals are about anything, they're about the puzzle of existence. How to unsnarl the emotions that play tug-of-war with our souls? In "Into the Woods," Cinderella debates whether to flee the prince or let him catch her on the palace steps. "You'll just leave him a clue," she concludes. "For example, a shoe." Or take Bobby, the commitment-phobic Manhattanite at the center of "Company." It takes him two acts to work out the mystery of his own thwarted longing. In "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," his three paramours sing, like stymied crossword players, "Exclusive you, / Elusive you, / Will any person ever get the juice of you?"

Was Sondheim himself as exclusive, as elusive? By his playmates' accounts, he mellowed as the decades went on, from the enfant terrible who subjected his friends to Hostilities to the éminence grise roaming through the City Center crowd, a satisfied grin on his face. To the players of his games, according to Joseph, he was both "devious adversary" and "number one cheerleader." Bernstein may have put it best, in a poem that he wrote for Sondheim's twenty-seventh birthday, while they were at work on "West Side Story":

Stephen Sondheim is a maker and solver of puzzles:
The jigsaw of his mind, the crosswords of creation, and
Especially the cryptologies of the heart.
Puzzler-poet of word and note, puzzled by some, puzzling to others . . .

Notice anything about the first letters of those lines? Naturally, the whole poem is an acrostic, spelling out S-T-E-P-H-E-N S-O-N-D-H-E-I-M. It takes a puzzler to know one. ♦

¹ water fountain

² sconce

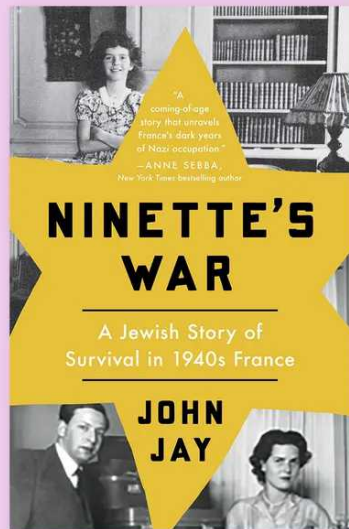
³ Maraschino

Books

Briefly Noted

“Ninette’s War,” “Bigger Than Fashion,” “The Award,” and “Analog Days.”

December 15, 2025



Ninette's War, by John Jay (*Pegasus*). In September, 1939, shortly before her twelfth birthday, Ninette Dreyfus, the youngest member of a Jewish Parisian banking family, started a diary. That diary, which she kept until 1951, forms the heart of this intimate portrait of the Holocaust in France. Documenting this history, as Jay notes, is a complex endeavor: unlike elsewhere in Europe, the persecution of Jews in France unfolded in “a gradual, uneven process,” with certain communities targeted as others were (temporarily) exempted. Jay, carefully substantiating Dreyfus’s account, brings clarity to a usually muddled story, shedding particular light on the French who collaborated to betray their Jewish compatriots.



Bigger Than Fashion, by Tyler Watamanuk (*Simon & Schuster*). This history of modern men’s streetwear—arguably arriving at the genre’s dénouement—consists of case studies detailing how a series of cool-kid T-shirt brands came to dominate the paychecks and birthday wish lists of generations of young people. Among the designers discussed are the household names Supreme and Stüssy and the luxury brands Off-White and Fear of God. Watamanuk’s reporting skews more commercial than cultural—major beats include failed sales projections that derail an acquisition and the anguished buyout of a soured partnership stake—as it charts the consequences of both products and people selling out.

What We're Reading

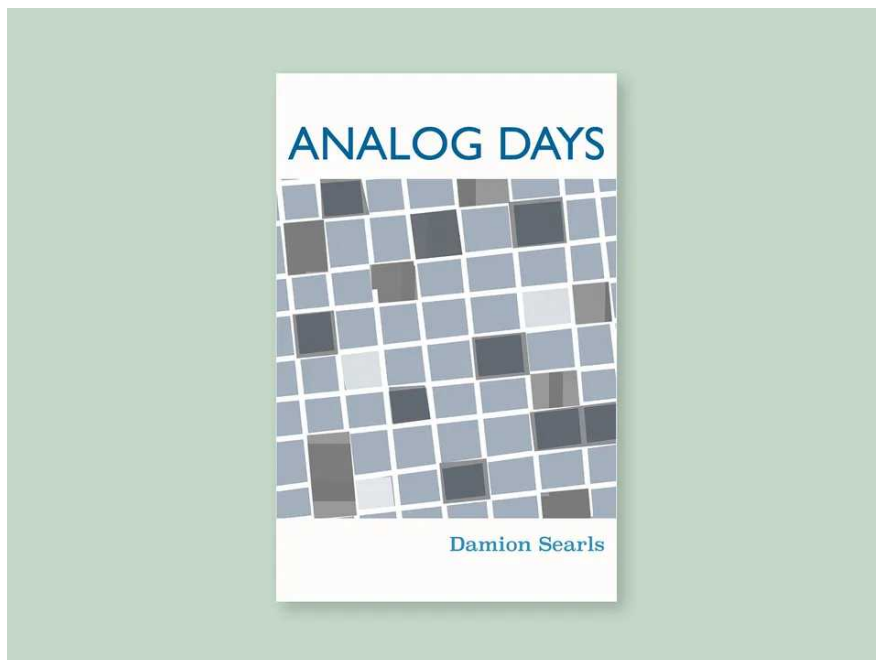


Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



The Award, by Matthew Pearl (Harper). David Trent, a struggling writer whose behavior steers this blackly comic thriller, exults upon learning that

his new neighbor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is the Pulitzer-winning novelist Silas Hale—“an echo,” he initially thinks, of “Henry David Thoreau living in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s backyard!” When it becomes clear that Silas has no interest in mentorship, though, David contrives to shore up his writerly status in other, increasingly reprehensible ways. Pearl revels in wickedness, presenting a literary world in which a successful writer’s haughtiness is both encouraged and rewarded. At the novel’s heart is an existential question put to David by his long-suffering girlfriend: “Was it better to be happy or to be a writer?”



Analog Days, by *Damion Searls* (*Coffee House*). In this diaristic novella by a prolific translator of the Norwegian Nobel laureate Jon Fosse, a narrator records several weeks in the summer of 2016 spent exchanging stories with friends in New York, travelling to San Francisco, and nursing foot injuries. To chronicle their days, Searls’s characters use methods that the internet is gradually rendering obsolete—one friend starts a print-only blog, and another uses archival white pages to track down a shuttered recording studio. Often opening a day’s entry with news of mass shootings, police brutality, and Donald Trump’s political rise, the book’s central character examines contemporary life’s horrors and indignities, and the still emergent technology that is exposing him to it all.

The Theatre

Memory Speaks in “Marjorie Prime” and “Anna Christie”

June Squibb sparkles opposite Cynthia Nixon in a futuristic drama, and Michelle Williams loses her way in Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize winner.

By Helen Shaw

December 14, 2025



Appropriately enough, Jordan Harrison’s déjà-vu-inducing “Marjorie Prime” has been here before. The Off Broadway theatre Playwrights Horizons produced the poignant sci-fi play about hyperrealistic re-creations of the dead—so-called Primes, which are used as a supportive technology for the bereaved—in Anne Kauffman’s spirited, delicately comic production, back in 2015. Lois Smith, then eighty-five years old, played Marjorie, a woman struggling with dementia. It’s the early twenty-sixties, and so Marjorie is attended by a holographic Prime of her husband, Walter, who tells her stories from her own life. Whatever sort of husband he was before his death, *this* Walter, eternally youthful, has nothing to do but sit ramrod straight, paying perfect attention to his wife, forever.

Now Second Stage revives “Marjorie Prime” at the Hayes, on Broadway, with the mischievous ninety-six-year-old June Squibb as a new and more buoyant Marjorie. Squibb, our ingénue, has also been here before. Her Broadway début was as a replacement in the role of the stripper Electra in the original 1959 production of “Gypsy”—she sang the immortal lyric “If you wanna make it / Twinkle while you shake it.” Squibb has dutifully kept twinkling (and shaking): her late-career renaissance surged in 2014, with an Oscar nomination for her turn as an exasperated wife in “Nebraska”; and, just last year, she starred in the action comedy “Thelma”—and did her own stunts.

Here, Cynthia Nixon plays Marjorie’s anxious daughter, Tess, and Danny Burstein plays her sweet son-in-law, Jon. (Kauffman returns to direct.) The three of them live in a strangely impersonal house—the uncanny set design is by Lee Jellinek—overtly “futuristic” only in its kitchen cabinets, which open upward, like the gull wings on a DeLorean. As Walter, Christopher Lowell is a particularly smooth-faced simulacrum; he is polite and attentive to everything the others say, gathering anecdotes one day so that he can regurgitate them the next. Tess wants to keep certain parts of the past secret from him—that way, Marjorie won’t relearn them—but Jon counsels candor. (Meanwhile, Marjorie persuades Walter to insert a movie-theatre outing to “Casablanca” into a story, to class the memory up a little.)

At first, stage time in “Marjorie Prime” operates according to a Marjorie-based tempo. If she forgets something—a day spent alone in the dark, a fall—then the play doesn’t show it. Blackouts between scenes seem to represent the gaps in Marjorie’s mind, and a great deal happens offstage which Marjorie discovers only when her daughter reminds her. Eventually, though, after her death, Marjorie “returns” as a Prime to support an inconsolable Tess, and the sequence gets even looser. Time jumps might span a year, or more. People die; Primes do not.

Another of Harrison’s sci-fi plays, “The Antiquities,” opened this year at Playwrights—and it, too, focusses on the nonhumans that will follow us. In that play, inorganic intelligences construct dioramas around artifacts from *Homo sapiens*, wondering how we might have used a clarinet or a bottle of shampoo. Isn’t it a comfort that our creations will still think about us, ex post facto? (The “facto” here is apocalypse.) We’ve been playing this

particular wistful-machines chord for a long time: Steven Spielberg's movie "A.I. Artificial Intelligence," from 2001, starred Haley Joel Osment as an android copy of a grieving woman's child who loves her in a way that no real boy could; right now, down the street, the decommissioned robots in the musical "Maybe Happy Ending" also recall their owners with pride and sorrow.

But something spikier is happening in this iteration of "Marjorie Prime." The intervening decade has changed Harrison's elegantly resigned "at least they'll miss us" narrative into something more macabre, more pointed, and more frightening. Walter Prime's willingness to overwrite facts to suit Marjorie's preferences looks a lot less adorable in a world where generative-A.I. agents can be tweaked to flatter their owners, not to mention the ramifications of Walter's constant hunger for Marjorie's data. We recognize this familiar type of predatory, pacifying interactive technology. Maybe we'll learn someday soon—maybe even tomorrow!—that the substitution of sycophantic A.I. "conversation" for human exchange was the decisive blow that did us in as a species.

That's the sort of thinking that can really take the pep out of an evening. And so although Kauffman again directs a production full of warmth—Squibb shines, Burstein radiates kindness—it's nonetheless a chilling night at the theatre. During the play's anguished climax, we find out that a character dies by suicide after having spoken, we don't know for how long, to a Prime. There is no implication in the original text that the thing might have encouraged self-harm, but I have my suspicions. Ten years ago, even Harrison couldn't have known how relentlessly helpful ChatGPT can be.

Where Harrison uses silences, stillness, and abbreviated scenes to suggest loss, Eugene O'Neill went with the opposite approach: the father of American drama never chose one word when a hundred would do. If during "Anna Christie," his Pulitzer Prize-winning play from 1921, O'Neill wanted you to note the symbolic effect of, say, fog, he would simply put "fog" in the script twenty-six times.

In the strange, self-sabotaging revival at St. Ann's Warehouse, directed by Thomas Kail, Michelle Williams plays Anna Christie. Should Anna's last name suggests a certain savior, it's because she begins as one of the fallen:

an exhausted twenty-year-old prostitute from St. Paul. Greta Garbo played this tough-spirited woman of the world in her first speaking film role, in 1930, and continues to throw a nearly century-long shadow. In Williams's case, Anna's famous first line—"Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby!"—comes out with a quiver of self-doubt. It doesn't sound like bravado. It sounds like a cry for help.

Anna has come East to meet her estranged father, the Swedish bargeman Chris (Brian d'Arcy James), who believes Anna's been earning money as a nursemaid. Eager to make a respectable impression, Chris shuffles off his hard-bitten companion, Marthy (Mare Winningham, squinting and grumbling delightfully), and father and daughter ride Chris's barge up the coast, through the fog, ready for a new start. "It makes me feel clean," Anna says of the sea, as if she's been washed of her sins. After they rescue a shipwrecked stoker named Mat Burke (Tom Sturridge), the galoot pins his romantic hopes on his mistaken idea of Anna's virtue. "Is it dreaming I am?" Mat wonders, when he sees her gleaming blond head appear before him, offering a drink. (Everyone in the play other than Chris and Mat sizes her up in a flash.)

O'Neill enjoyed writing in dialect, and so the actors here must contend with all manner of thick-accent work, which makes comprehension tricky. Sturridge, a Londoner, chooses an impenetrable inflection (it could be Scouse, though his character says that he's Irish), and d'Arcy James, among our finest musical-theatre actors, has a ball with his syncopated Swedish mannerisms. Williams, unfortunately, is so wrong-footed by the requirements of the period's rhythms that her first heavily accented appearance, in a dockside saloon, is her most unsteady. In moments during the second half, though, when she's less conscientiously Midwestern, she takes on an electric, fitful jangliness, which seems appropriate for a woman trying to re-start the cold engine of her life.

Unfortunately, Sturridge gives a counterintuitive performance, one so at odds with the play's romance and the performances around him that it sinks the ship. O'Neill describes the coal stoker, in one of his many page-filling stage directions, as a "powerful, broad-chested six-footer . . . in the full power of his heavy-muscled, immense strength." The trouble isn't that Sturridge, who has a quicksilver, elven quality, has been cast against type;

it's that he interprets the bewildered, love-stunned lummoX as a pallid, twitchy creep, crawling on his haunches like Caliban and wriggling as if he's got an eel down his trousers. (The night I saw it, Mat wouldn't stop fumbling with his pants—*Anna*, I thought, *get out*.) Kail emphasizes this odd disjunction by stacking the mostly unspeaking ensemble with bruisers, their rolled sleeves straining over yoked shoulders. They, alongside similarly capable-looking stagehands, haul elements of Christine Jones and Brett J. Banakis's set around, totin' platforms and heftin' tables. Maybe Kail is unconcerned with realism and has asked Sturridge to play Mat's inner self, the frail and contorting one he keeps hidden. But then what's with all the stevedores from central casting?

Kail is best known for directing "Hamilton" and co-developing the television series "Fosse/Verdon," which also starred Williams; the two married in 2020. Kail clearly has an abiding interest in dance-adjacent theatre. Here, he has Steven Hoggett choreograph the movement, which includes monkeylike capering from Mat—at one point, he extends a hesitant simian arm to Anna while crouching like a chimp on the floor—and the aforementioned stevedores. I have to assume, therefore, that Kail intends a deliberate elision between this work and O'Neill's Expressionist "The Hairy Ape," from 1922, which employs the same plot elements to a much different effect. In that play, too, an engine stoker, Yank, falls for a blonde, though he then turns violent after the anemic girl, who represents society's upper crust, recoils.

The main character of "Anna Christie," however, is not the stoker. (The clue is in the title.) Mat is no Yank, an animal waking to the presence of his cage, and Anna is no shrinking violet—she's a resourceful survivor with a well-earned distrust of men who's stubborn enough to try for love anyhow. Williams, a tense and withholding presence onstage, might yet have an Anna in her, but it's hard to see in this production, hampered as she is by Kail's staging and Sturridge's baffling interpretation. (No sane woman would choose to date this guy.) You can nonetheless find fragments of her potential Anna. Williams has a lovely way of letting her face go slack whenever she's calling on her deepest reserves of courage—she does it right before she tells the men the truth of her working past. O'Neill's play imagines Anna as something of a Christ(ie) figure, and Williams works out how to show us the

awful stillness she feels right before redemption. Is it enough to save us, too? Well, no. But it does, for a moment, penetrate the fog. ♦

The Lovably Fragile Exes of “Is This Thing On?”

Bradley Cooper’s latest film, about separated spouses played by Laura Dern and Will Arnett, is scrappy but soul-nourishing.

By Justin Chang

December 12, 2025



Laura Dern’s scowl is one of the great wonders of American movies. Her mouth flattens into a blade, her eyes constrict into lasers, and you tense up instinctively, as if you might get caught in the crossfire. There’s a moment in “Is This Thing On?,” a modestly scaled but enormously affecting new picture directed by Bradley Cooper, when Dern’s expression, a silent commingling of shock, disbelief, and fury, almost stops your heart. She plays Tess Novak, a retired Olympic volleyball player turned New York suburban mom, who has recently separated from her husband of twenty years, Alex (Will Arnett). Out with a potential love interest one evening, in a packed Manhattan comedy club, Tess is startled when Alex strides up to the microphone. Unaware of her presence, he proceeds to warm up the crowd

with details of their marriage—and of a recent one-night stand, his first sexual experience since they split. “What the fuck is happening?” Tess murmurs, having had no idea that Alex, who works in finance, has started moonlighting in standup. Her date (Peyton Manning, in a sporting cameo) asks if they should leave. “No,” she says, curiosity outstripping humiliation. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

You won’t want to, either. Soon enough, Tess’s displeasure softens into exasperation, then amazement, before melting into a tender ghost of a smile. It helps that Alex doesn’t throw Tess under the bus. They have two ten-year-old sons—Jude (Calvin Knechten) and Felix (Blake Kane)—and their split has been a determinedly amicable one. Even Alex’s account of his fling builds to an aww-inducing punch line: “The whole experience, to be honest, made me miss my wife.” I almost wish that Cooper had held on a closeup of Dern for the scene’s duration, the better to capture the uninterrupted play of emotions on her face. But “Is This Thing On?” is just as interested in Alex. And Arnett, in a sneakily revelatory performance, proves a good enough actor to convince you that he isn’t a skilled comedian, or even much of an entertainer. Watching him, all memory of Gob Bluth, the self-aggrandizing, fatuously inept magician he played on the series “Arrested Development,” fades from view. You see only Alex, middle-aged dad and soon-to-be divorcé, awkwardly bracing himself under the glare of the spotlight—and finding that it suits him surprisingly well.

Alex fell into standup by accident. Now living on his own in the city, he stumbled into a bar one night and, with no cash to pay the cover, agreed to step up to an open mike. The routine that followed was more mumbly than inspired, delivered in a smoker’s rasp and with a downcast gaze. Even off the stage, Arnett clues you in to Alex’s recessiveness, his discomfort at being the center of attention. But something about that rare brush with public performance—the chance to work out his feelings about his failed marriage in front of a crowd—keeps him coming back. Weeks later, he has more or less hit his stride. Tess notices how much Alex has changed, how easily he drinks in the audience’s laughs and feeds off its energy. The sight doesn’t just surprise her; it arouses her. With apologies to Stanley Cavell, “Is This Thing On?” might have devised a new subgenre—the standup comedy of remarriage.

The invention, though, comes from real life. Alex's experience is loosely modelled on that of John Bishop, a British pharmaceutical salesman who, with no standup experience, began performing at open-mike nights at the Frog and Bucket Comedy Club, in Manchester, in 2000. At the time, Bishop was separated from his wife, Melanie, and he later credited his therapeutic forays into comedy, in part, with the salvation of their relationship—and, eventually, with the launch of a performing career. He can now also credit that period, of course, as the inspiration for a Hollywood movie, transplanted from Manchester to Manhattan and featuring no shortage of actual cutups, including Chloe Radcliffe, Jordan Jensen, Dave Attell, and Reggie Conquest. But “Is This Thing On?” isn't a dishy, insider's view of the New York comedy scene, and it isn't trying to be. It knows that its best material lies elsewhere.

Cooper has a thing for marriage stories, specifically those that unfold, at least partly, in the public eye. He began his filmmaking career, in 2018, with a fine remake of “A Star Is Born,” the mother of all Hollywood marital melodramas; in his version, he played a downward-spiralling country-music star opposite Lady Gaga's ascendant pop diva. He followed up that film with “Maestro” (2023), a dexterously directed bio-pic of Leonard Bernstein (Cooper again, now equipped with a baton and a much derided prosthetic nose) that took pains to lavish equal dramatic attention on Felicia Montealegre (Carey Mulligan), a stage and screen actor often relegated to the shadow role of Bernstein's wife. The two pictures could scarcely have been more different, but they circled the same subject with the same bristling intelligence: how the inequities of fame and fortune can upset the already precarious balance of power in a relationship.

With “Is This Thing On?,” Cooper has made a conscious effort to scale down and cheer up. He has also opted to take at least half a step back from the spotlight, casting himself not as the lead but in the cheerful second-banana role of Alex's best friend, Balls. This name is your second clue that Cooper's showboating tendencies are not exactly in retreat. The first is the character's initial entrance: returning one night to his apartment, where Alex, Tess, and a few other friends have gathered, Balls trips, spills an entire carton of oat milk on the rug, and giggles so hard at his own boisterous clumsiness that you have to wonder if it was a premeditated bit. Even so, Cooper, whatever his pratfalls, doesn't tumble into the trap of derailing his

own movie. He doesn't even steal scenes; he just picks them up for a moment, gives them a rude little squeeze, and then lets them slip back, unbothered, into place.

The film's cinematographer, Matthew Libatique, is a virtuoso of handheld camerawork, and he shoots with a rough-hewn intimacy that offsets, and sometimes even deepens, the softer, more sitcomy formulations of the script. (Cooper, Arnett, and Mark Chappell wrote the script; the latter two received story credit with Bishop.) Alex has the world's most lovably supportive parents (Christine Ebersole and Ciarán Hinds), who are delighted to babysit at the drop of a hat or the booking of a last-minute gig. Alex and Tess, determined to keep the peace with their friends, remain almost improbably close to Balls and his wife, Christine (a sharp Andra Day), who appear to be trapped in an unhappy marriage of their own. The Novaks are as congenial as they are comfortably off; not for them the spiteful divorce-court theatrics of Noah Baumbach's "Marriage Story" (2019), for which Dern won an Oscar for playing a delectably cutthroat family-law attorney. The closest Alex and Tess get to a custody battle is a halfhearted chat about who gets the armoire.

So why, despite the Novaks' glow of privilege, do we find them more than sufferable, even endearing, in their fragility? You might as well ask why a heavily foreshadowed performance of Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure," with its unsubtle entreaty to "give love that one more chance," somehow provides just the right note of climactic release. Cooper has a gift for striking conventional beats with knowing understatement, though you do, at times, hear the hiss of an airbrush. During a set one night, Alex delves into the intensely psychological nature of his past fights with Tess; the story builds to a good punch line, but you almost wonder, given how little we see of the couple in full-blown marital-spat mode, if he isn't exaggerating for comic effect. Much of the third act is set at an Oyster Bay retreat with Christine, Balls, and two married friends (Scott Icenogle and Sean Hayes, who are also husbands offscreen), where Alex and Tess struggle to keep their possibly temporary reunion under wraps. The emotional revelations and the quasi-farcical shenanigans don't entirely jell, even if the over-all arc, by that point, is clear: with a little self-care—comedy nights for Alex, a volleyball-coaching gig for Tess—an imperfect but loving family might be salvaged.

If that sounds tidily prescriptive, Cooper gives the reality of heartache its due. Rather than slathering angst over every scene, he lets sadness well up when the characters least expect it—as when Tess, visiting Alex’s new apartment, catches sight of two little light-up toothbrushes in his bathroom. Or when one of their sons, after rifling through Dad’s joke folder, quietly sobs at what he’s found. Laughter may be the best medicine, but what if the illness is preferable to the cure? It’s as if Alex, in riffing on life’s most painful raw material, had already packed up his dream of a whole, happy family—and moved on. ♦

Poems

- [Roller-Rink Nocturne](#)
- [Greetings, Friends!](#)

Poems

Roller-Rink Nocturne

By Aimee Nezhukumatathil

December 15, 2025



When we try to pretend the moon moves
across our faces, we get a disco ball. Lightning
bolts and star-printed carpets glow fluorescent
yellow and purple under black lights. When
we get hungry and our hairlines wet with a song
of sweat, we pool crumpled bills from our pockets
and split a hot slice and a medium RC cola.
If you learn to skate backward, here, for a few hours,
you could be royalty. If someone asked you to skate
during Couples Skate, you were Empress Legionnaire.

If you could fold into a Romeo Slide, Cannonball,
or Shoot-the-Moon, you might as well be named

Supreme Leader Admiral of the Fleet. All you need
is practice. When we play at night, our eyes and body

don't ever forget. Our bodies remember the glide,
just like a river remembers each meander.

This is drawn from “[Night Owl](#).”

Poems

Greetings, Friends!

It's the annual Christmas poem: so turn the carols to eleven!

By Ian Frazier

December 15, 2025



As now the year two-oh-two-five,
Somewhat ragged but alive,
Reels and staggers to the finish,
All its drawbacks can't diminish,
Friends, how gladly 'tis we greet you!
We aver, and do repeat, you
Have our warm felicitations
Full of gladsome protestations
Of Christmastime regard!
Though we have yet to rake the yard,
Mercy! It's already snowing.
Stuck in the chimney, let's get going.
Scooch up or down, strew gifts to cheer
All those who sanded *ICE* this year,

Stout heroes of all ilks and stripes,
And glorious pals of various types.
Hurrah for Z. Mamdani (Mayor)!
May he prove a rent-hike slayer.
Young as any boomer's kid—
How did he do what he just did?
We'll celebrate the Portland frogs
While filling steins with spicy grogs
For M.I.T. Pres. Kornbluth (Sally),
Each and ev'ry "No Kings" rally,
Good Pope Leo, Cajun prelate,
Cory Booker (preach it! tell it!),
Nicole Collier, Texas holdout,
May her fortitude be told out,
Docu-maker M. Guevara,
Grabbed and held despite the bar a
Court had put on such detention.
Here we also have to mention
Fernando Jaramillo-Solano
Snatched in Durango, Colorado,
Dropping offspring off at school—
The point, it seems, is to be cruel.
But Yuletide, guys, will not abide that;
Better angels override that.
Speaking of, Ro Khanna rocks!
Judge Tanya Chutkan's got the chops.
Be-wreathed may Erik Siebert be
(Just look him up and you will see
How cool he's been), and garlands to
David Huerta, Kat Abu,
David Blatt, of Oklahoma,
Those who protest in Pomona,
Brenna Frey, ex-Skadden lawyer
(Braver than her old employer),
All the suits at Paul, Weiss (NOT!),
Lisa Cook, Elissa Slot-
kin, worthy judges Young and Breyer,

Sooknanan, and, even higher,
Kagan, Jackson, and our Sonia—
Blessings of the season on ya!
We have found some gorgeous cards.
Help us as we sign them, pards,
To author Omar El Akkad (“ak-ed”),
By whose book we sure were sock-ed,
Vicki Miller, belle of Phila.,
California’s Sen. Padilla,
Youman Wilder, uptown coach
Whose bravery is beyond reproach,
Sen. Ben Ray Luján, of New Mex.,
Bishop Seitz (El Paso, Tex.),
Shenna Bellows, Maine Sec. of State,
Mark Singer, the reporter, great
Truth-teller of deserved renown.
For Ras Baraka, Sherrod Brown,
Sheldon Whitehouse, Jamie Raskin,
And A.O.C., in case you’re askin’,
We will attach a tinselled tree,
Whatever the logistics be.
Now, hark! We’ve joyous news to tell
Re Clara Jane Cep, David Brunel—
Welcome, babies! Ditto, forthwith,
To Ricardo Penades the fifth,
Charles Riederer Nelson (born in May),
And Liora Lieber—hip-hurray
For her and her twin brother, Jude!
To Emily Joseph Mirro
We’ll make a graceful pirou-
ette, and strike a beaming attitude
Like that of our dear old Aunt Betty
While we kvell o’er Saira Wei Shetty,
Raising praises far from cursory
For this entire outstanding nursery!
Of this cracked year, what can be said?
Throw up one’s hands and shake one’s head.

We might forget, or hardly dare,
To state that there's still love out there
In truly huge amounts, indwelling
Past all reckoning or telling,
Buffering cars in traffic jams
Glazing trays of candied yams,
Pulsing in the pop charts' latest,
Proving it is still the greatest
Force that powers earth and heaven.
So turn the carols to eleven
And sing of love's ubiquity
Far off and in propinquity.
To find yourself deep in its thrall:
Our Christmas wish for one and all.

The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Hannah Goldfield's Take about Anthony Bourdain and James Somers's piece about whether A.I. is thinking.

December 15, 2025

A Bourdain Tribute

Hannah Goldfield's article about "Don't Eat Before Reading This," by Anthony Bourdain, brought back memories of when I first learned of this new voice straddling the restaurant and literary worlds ([Takes](#), November 17th). When Bourdain's book "Kitchen Confidential" came out, in 2000, I was the general manager of an Italian restaurant at a historic five-star hotel. The staff was full of brainy foodies, and we talked about the book endlessly. We all thought Bourdain might end up being a flash in the pan, but were happy to be proved wrong.

I worked in restaurants for more than twenty-five years, and the thing that I admired the most about Bourdain was his unflagging respect for the line and prep cooks and dishwashers he worked with, who were often immigrants (as such employees often are now). I've always been especially moved by Bourdain's words about Mexico, which he called "a country I feel particularly attached to and grateful for. In nearly 30 years of cooking professionally, just about every time I walked into a new kitchen, it was a Mexican guy who looked after me, had my back, showed me what was what, and was there —and on the case —when the cooks like me, with backgrounds like mine, ran away to go skiing or surfing or simply flaked."

Although I never had the opportunity to meet Bourdain in person, I miss him every day. What a loss his tragic early demise was, not just for the restaurant world but also for culture and society.

Miyuki One Bear
San Jose, Calif.

Still Thinking

In James Somers's piece about whether A.I. programs can be said to be "thinking," a neuroscientist touts the progress of computer models, claiming, "Now you can give memory models the exact stimuli you give to a person" ("[Open Mind](#)," November 10th). Surely that's not right. How do you digitally capture a rush of adrenaline, or the warmth of sunlight felt on skin, or the sight of a sweeping mountain—or any of the other physical sensations that accompany and influence our memories and thoughts? It seems to me that many of the researchers Somers talked to haven't fully considered the fact that our minds, like neural networks, don't exist in a vacuum—and that they are formed by inputs based on physical experience.

Somers quotes a cognitive-science professor who says that understanding of the mechanics of neural networks "takes away from the beauty of what humanity is." I don't feel that way at all, especially when I contemplate my sensations. Rather, I find perpetual wonder in the innumerable chance occurrences that led to my ability to perceive them.

Derek Prater
Prairie Village, Kans.

I thoroughly enjoyed Somers's article, and share both his cautious speculation that today's models may have an "ability to 'get' what someone is talking about" and his understanding that those models are often less efficient than the mind of a toddler. Perhaps the reason for the superior efficiency of the human mind is the ability to learn not only from one's own experience but also from that of others. The Harvard computer scientist Leslie Valiant, in his book "The Importance of Being Educable," offers an eloquent (and eminently readable) exploration of this ability, extending it to examine what distinguishes human and machine learning. I would recommend his work to anybody interested in questions like the one Somers entertains.

Orest Hurko
Lincoln, Mass.

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