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One-eyed Jim

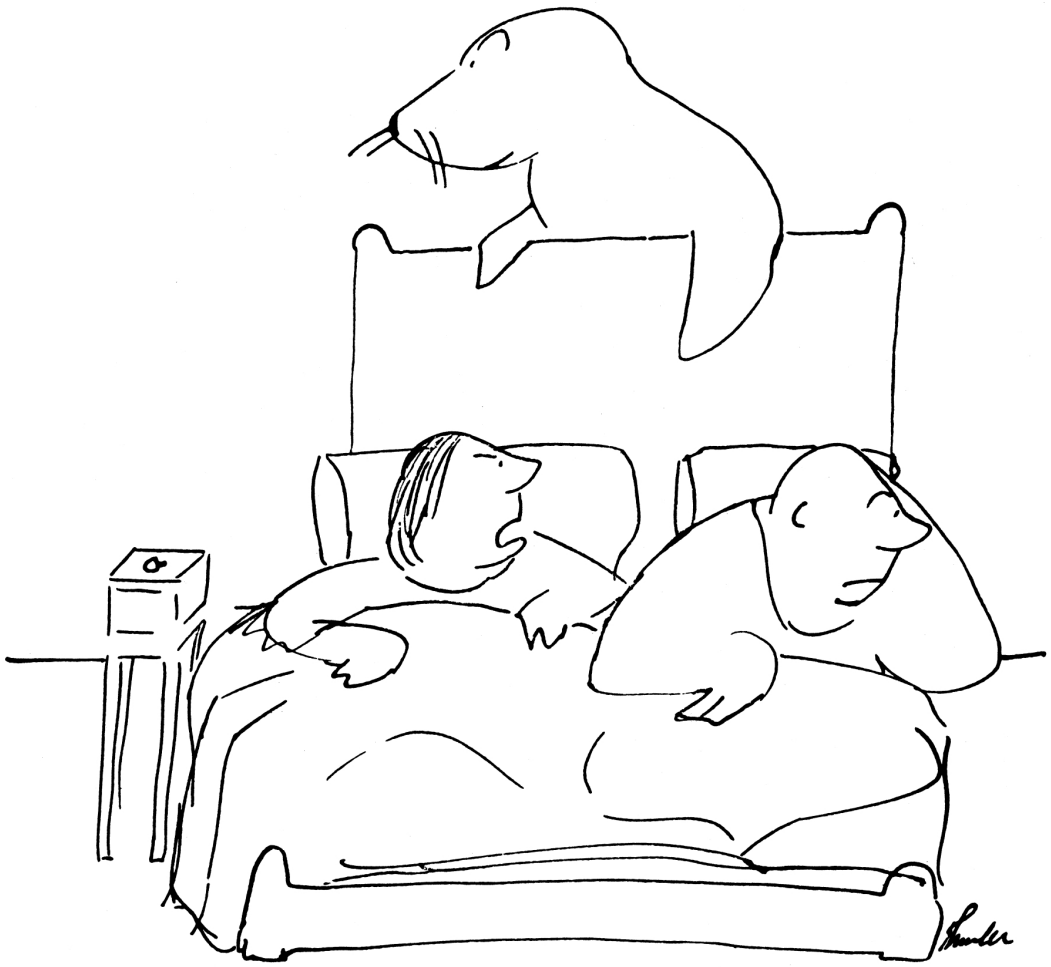
by Nic Rowan

When James Thurber was seven years old, his brother William accidentally blinded him in one eye. The two had been playing a game in which one boy rested an apple on his head and the other shot it off with a toy bow and arrow. When it was James's turn to balance the apple, he turned around a second too soon, and William's arrow knocked his left eye permanently out of commission.

Over the next few decades, Thurber's vision only got worse. His missing left eye prevented him from serving in World War I. He could no longer drive at night by 1935. His right eye began seriously failing in the 1940s. Over the next decade, he became all but blind. And yet, even as his eyes dimmed, Thurber became one of the best-known American cartoonists and illustrators of the mid-twentieth century.

Thurber never considered himself a serious artist. He was a writer first, and those who still know and love his work usually remember Thurber for his short stories riffing on twentieth-century anxieties: divorce, alcoholism, nudity, feminism, and a host of other middle-class headaches. The cartoons packed the written jokes with punch; perhaps for this reason, his drawings have had the longer shelf life. Displaying them makes for the best way to commemorate Thurber, and the Columbus Museum of Art has done just that with "A Mile and a Half of Lines: The Art of James Thurber," on view through March 2020.

Thurber was a native of Columbus, and when he moved to New York in the 1920s to seek work as a journalist, he brought a droll midwestern charm with him. The fledgling New Yorker hired him as an editor in 1927, but the magazine's editor-in-chief, Harold Ross, quickly reassigned Thurber to write fiction, essays, and reported pieces. It was a good decision. From his perch at The New Yorker, Thurber produced the enduring short stories "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939) and "The Catbird Seat" (1942), as well as the memoir My Life and Hard Times (1933).



"All Right, Have It Your Way—You Heard a Seal Bark!"

James Thurber, "Alright, you did hear a seal bark!," Pen and ink on paper, Ohio State University Libraries.

Thurber's short stories and personal essays are all marked by similar concerns. He picks on henpecked men and overbearing wives, all of whom are too baffled and stunned by the world and its complexities to make any sense of it. In a classic example, "The Unicorn in the Garden" (1939), a man wakes up to find a mythical beast eating his roses. When he tells his wife, she refuses to believe him, calls the police, and threatens to send her husband to the "booby hatch." She rants and raves so much that, when the police arrive, they haul her, not her bewildered husband, away.

This fable is typical of Thurber: a dissatisfied group of people blunder into a situation where their own incompetence only worsens their lives. The cartoons tell much the same story. Men's heads fly off at random, wives are stashed atop bookcases, and seals bark in the night. These are shower thoughts of a man who excelled at making light of tragedy.

Many of the cartoons were simply doodles Thurber jotted out in his spare time. When he was bored or frustrated, Thurber scribbled pictures on pieces of scrap paper. One day, his friend and fellow New Yorker writer E. B. White found several of these in the office trash can and submitted

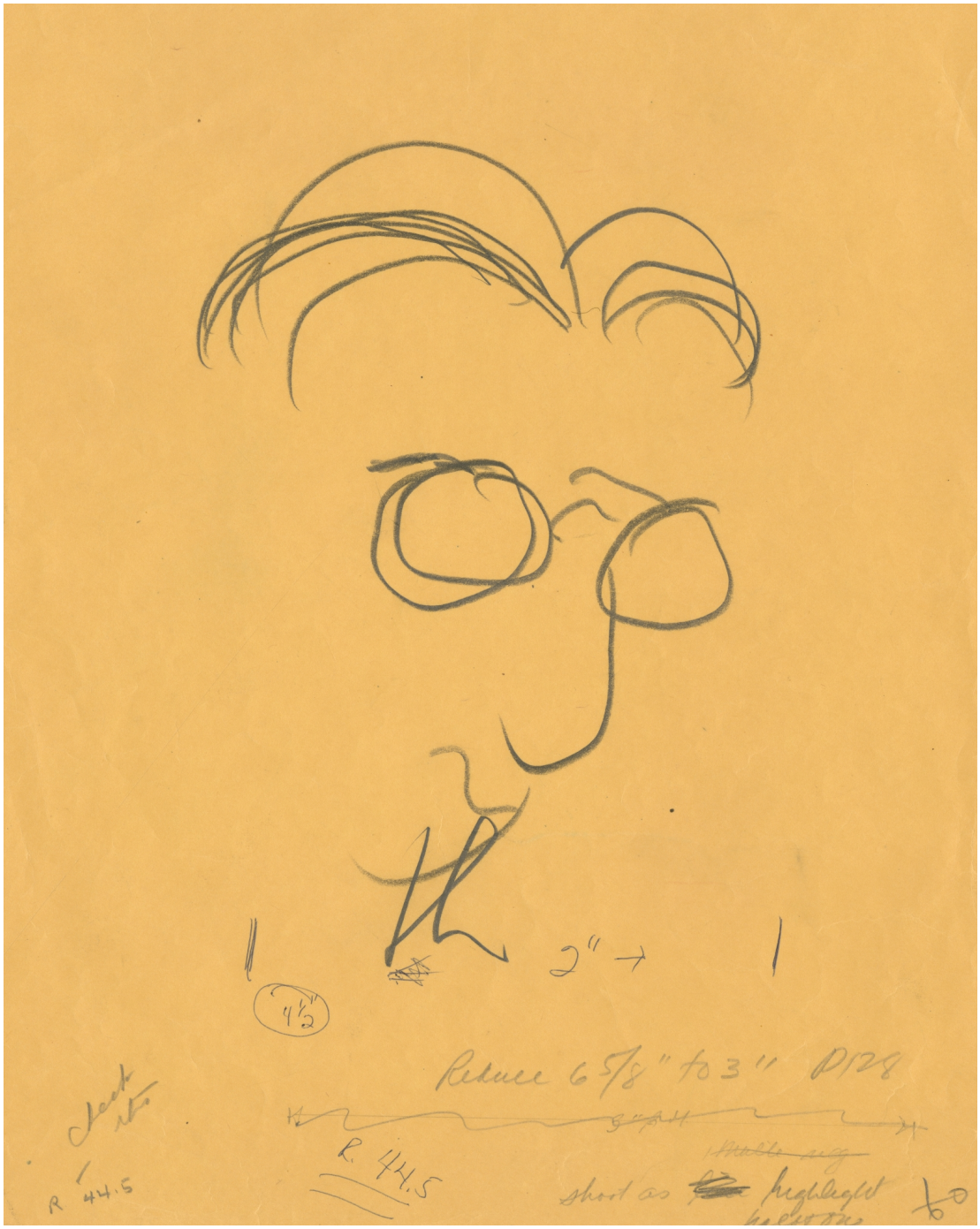
them for print. The magazine ran with them, and in no time Thurber was a comic staple, providing spare, bizarre illustrations of the anxious world around him.

James Thurber, "Death comes for the dowager," Pen and ink on paper, Ohio State University Libraries.

One of his most famous New Yorker cartoons, “Touché!,” which depicts one man shouting at another as he decapitates him, shows what sets Thurber apart as a humorist. The drawing is essentially two stick figures, both very surprised, the newly headless one probably more so. Thurber drew it at the request of Ross, who thought that other attempts to execute the joke were too gruesome. Only Thurber had the absurdist comic touch necessary to make such a scene funny.

But a decapitation is still a decapitation, even one of a stick figure. Thurber was quick to point out that while his style was childish, his subject matter was not. When people attempted to copy him, he dismissed them: “Mothers thought that I was a little child or that my drawings were done by my granddaughter,” he once said. “So they’d send in their own children’s drawing to the New Yorker, so I was told to write these ladies, and I would write them all the same letter: ‘Your son can certainly draw as well as I can. The only trouble is he hasn’t been through as much.’ ”

For Thurber, “going through a lot” meant suffering through ever-worsening vision, overwork, and divorce. All these underlie his jokes and are perhaps what led T. S. Eliot to write in his appraisal of Thurber that “there is a criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even somber.” Eliot went further, predicting that, because of the real weight of Thurber’s apparent frivolities, “his writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring.”



James Thurber, "Self-portrait," Pencil on yellow copy paper, Ohio State University Libraries.

It seems that they have. This year marks the 125th anniversary of Thurber's birth, and Columbus is giving its native son his due. In addition to the Columbus Museum of Art's exhibition, his boyhood home, the Thurber House, is hosting a series of book readings and arts festivals to celebrate his legacy. A number of books on Thurber, including a new collection of his fables, are also appearing this year.

Visitors to either venue will likely walk past a statue that reminds them of Thurber's melancholy—a unicorn prancing in the garden across the street from his old house. It's a fitting memorial for an artist whose life, while very funny, was ultimately very sad.

Shortly after Thurber became completely blind, he lost the man who made him famous. Harold Ross died during a failed lung operation in 1951. Thurber found out while out to lunch in Manhattan, and he immediately ran back to the New Yorker offices, seeking the comfort of White. When he arrived, though, he had no one to guide him down the hallways.

The scene was like something out of King Lear. Eyewitnesses remember seeing Thurber, crying and clawing at the walls on which he had wryly scribbled grim cartoons some years prior. He could no longer see a particular phrase he had written in many places, but knew it all too well: "Too late."

Nic Rowan writes from Washington, D.C.