

**Q**UARTERLY  
**P**RESS REVIEW  
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

SPRING 2011



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## The Art of Lydia Davis

by James Kidd

IF THE NAME Lydia Davis doesn't mean much to you, never fear: until recently it meant little to anyone, anywhere. The author of one novel (1995's *The End of the Story*) and several collections of strange, brief and intriguing short fiction Davis has spent the majority of her career far from the mainstream, publishing her work in avant garde literary journals and on obscure websites. Her first book, 1976's *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories*, was little more than a pamphlet restricted to just five hundred copies. With numbers like that, you can sell out an entire print run and still be a jot on the landscape. If the sixty-three year-old writer, academic and translator was known for anything, it was primarily as the ex-wife of Paul Auster and as an esteemed translator of French literature: most famously, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Leiris, a new version of Proust's *Swann's Way* and the forthcoming *Madame Bovary* for Penguin.

Nevertheless, what Davis's readership lacked in size, it made up for in stature: her loyal cheerleaders include the cream of contemporary American fiction like Rick Moody, Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Francine Prose and the late David Foster Wallace. Perhaps this explains why it now seems mandatory for critics to refer to Davis as a 'writer's writer', shorthand that means she is more highly praised than widely read.

That is, until last year when *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* was published in America. Critics everywhere fell over themselves to extol Davis's individualism, to praise the courage of her artistic

vision and to boast about the duration of their admiration: writing in the *New Yorker*, James Wood made sure to record that he first encountered Davis as far back as the mid-1990s. These rave reviews have now spread over the Atlantic and across the world.

So why all the fuss? And why has it taken critics and readers so long to catch on? One answer can be boiled down to a single word: concision. If brevity truly is the soul of wit, then Davis is the wittiest author around. While doorstoppers like *War and Peace* and *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* test both a reader's stamina and the strength of their grip, Davis's minimalistic fiction strains the eyesight. Blink and you really might miss a Lydia Davis. Here is 'Insomnia' from her 2007 volume, *Varieties of Disturbance*:

My body aches so –  
It must be this heavy bed pressing up against me.

And that's all she wrote. Or how about 'Nietzsche', which sounds dangerously close to poetry, and comic poetry at that:

Oh, poor Dad. I'm sorry I made fun of you.  
Now I'm spelling Nietzsche wrong, too.

Both of these fizzles (to use Samuel Beckett's term) seem positively epic when compared to 'index Entry':

Christian, I'm not a.

Davis's curtness poses a number of fundamental questions. How short can a short story get before it is too short to be a short story? Are these stories at all? Perhaps they are Christmas cracker jokes elevated to the status of art?

In fact, Davis's brevity is central to her power as a writer, which achieves a delicate balance between revealing and concealing. Denuded of the familiar Chekovian contexts (character, plot, clarity of setting, time, tone, mood), Davis demands that the reader read between the lines – and around them too. The typographically-challenged 'Nietzsche' makes one feel as if one is eavesdropping on a life-long conversation between father and daughter. Its cheerful couplet provides a counterpoint to this short study of ageing and forgetting, and the pathos of hard-won empathy: so much depends on that concluding 'too'. 'Insomnia' whisks us into a present tense (perhaps with accents of Keats's heart-ache?) of physical discomfort and mental turmoil: the narrator's life feels literally turned upside down as the bed presses 'up'. Why she cannot sleep remains unspoken.

These one- and two-liners are a relatively recent addition to Davis's literary *oeuvre*. She has described them as a reaction to the working on Proust's convoluted sentences. This was a matter of both aesthetics and convenience: with little time left for her own work, Davis found herself compacting her prose to Twitter-like proportions. Davis has come a long way from her literary origins in the late 1960s. Her first stories are relatively conventional, albeit after a fleeting fashion: an early work like 'Ways' has a recognisable setting (Buenos Aires), characters (a boy called Luis and his father) and even a conflict to be resolved. In another life, she might even have signed up to the 'Dirty Realist' movement that dominated American fiction in the late 1970s thanks to writers like Raymond Carver, Tobias Woolf and Ann Beattie. Davis's precision, minimalism and attention to the smallest details of everyday life fit nicely with Bill Buford's Dirty Realist manifesto which praised 'the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture'.

For Carver, minimalism meant terse renderings of the language spoken by working-class American archetypes: the drifter, the downtrodden waitress, the outsider, the prostitute, the angry, incommunicative son. Davis, by contrast, is too playful, too sceptical about conventional realism, too middle-class and in the final analysis too un-American to play easily with Carver's slice of fictional life. Instead, she took her cue largely from European experimentalists: she name-checks Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes*, Beckett, Nabokov and Joyce, and latter-day writers like Russell Edson, Peter Altenberg and Robert Walser. One also detects the influence of Borges and Donald Barthelme, the playful American short-story writer.

Davis's 'little disturbances in language and gesture' take place not in the diner or dysfunctional home but on the page. Her 'nuances' are those of syntax, rhythm and punctuation. Take the one paragraph snippet, 'What She Knew':

People did not know what she knew, that she was not really a woman but a man, often a fat man, but more often, probably, an old man. The fact that she was an old man made it hard for her to be a young woman. It was hard for her to talk to a young man, for instance, though the young man was clearly interested in her. She had to ask herself, Why is this young man flirting with this old man?

If this has any sort of plot, it is the friction between two conceptions of identity. We are what we narrate, the speaker says, before a witty shift of perspective reminds her that identity is also narrated by the people around us. Davis keeps a pretty straight face even as the disjunction between private and public identities descends (or ascends) towards absurdist comedy. This is fiction inasmuch as we ourselves are fictions – characters imagined by

ourselves and others. Davis is also alive to the limitations of those fictions: what we know, and don't know, about ourselves and others.

In this survey of the minutiae of thought and experience, there is something of the essayist in Davis – perhaps Montaigne, Lamb and Hazlitt – or even, perhaps, the lyric poet – Keats, Whitman, Plath. Her subjects can be high and/or low, grand or small, personal or objective. Davis's meditations include epic events like looking at a fish, knocking over a glass of water, watching *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. 'Television' describes the consolation, and eerie isolation, of watching *Hawaii 5-0* in unspeaking silence with your family. At the same time, she is just as comfortable musing on Kafka and Dr. Johnson.

Davis is, then, a self-consciously literary writer. Her writing is also self-consciously *written*. She exploits all manner of forms: the Q&A, the index, the sociology report, the journal, the dictionary, the French primer. 'Southward Bound, Reads *Worstword Ho*' channels the titular tale by Samuel Beckett through a series of footnotes (literally southward bound), which far outweigh the main text. In 'A Mown Lawn', the narrative is driven by language itself. Davis rolls the vowels and consonants of the titular phrase around a single paragraph with ever-increasing desperation: '*moan lawn... a woman... long moan... raw war... more Nam... lawman... lawn order*'. The effect is hysterical in all senses of the word. One detects a mind at once desperate to impose order on the world and also spiralling out of control. The concluding '*lawn moron*' suggests a form of protest too: a ludic *cri de coeur* against the prevailing cultural and political philistinism of early twenty-first century America.

Like Donald Barthelme, Davis is very good at titles. 'Passing Wind' elevates the fart gag from farcical comedy of manners to a Beckett-like epistemological meditation. Two people and a dog sit in a room. One farts. But which one? No one is saying, not even

the dog. Or are they? As the tension heightens (along with the stench and the uncertainty), the title shifts its weight from flatulence to suggest, first, the levity of Davis's topic, and then the difficulty of discovering the truth.

Also like Barthelme, Davis is very good at first and last lines. Here is the entirety of 'Safe Love':

She was in love with her son's pediatrician. Alone out in the country – could anyone blame her.

There was an element of grand passion in this love. It was also a safe thing. The man was on the other side of a barrier. Between him and her: the child on the examining table, the office itself, the staff, his wife, her husband, his stethoscope, his beard, her breasts, his glasses, her glasses, etc.

In only a few simple words, Davis conveys enormous amounts of information: marriage, motherhood, unhappiness, loneliness. Her prose is delicately imbued with a feeling of poised restraint – 'There was an *element* of grand passion in this love' – which perfectly echoes the protagonist's poised attempts to restrain her feeling: about isolation, guilt, desire and illicit love, here reduced to the state of a 'thing'. But feeling, no matter how restrained, will out – even if it is only in the imagination.

The final sentence listing all the barriers to romance is by turns resigned, comically pedantic ('his stethoscope, his beard' are literally *between* them) and slyly erotic. The barriers themselves increase the intensity of the day-dream. The rhythm of the prose makes the reader intensely aware of the character's intense awareness. As the sentence jump-cuts between obstacles, the obstacles themselves become sexually charged.

The characters seem to move in for a kiss: 'his beard, her breasts, his glasses, her glasses, etc.' What should we make of that

enigmatic and slightly flippant ‘etc.’? Is the woman wearily berating herself for falling into cliché? Is she describing the inevitability of inaction, or of action? Or is the prose averting its eyes from the continuation of the fantasy?

Davis’s often fastidious semantic precision has led some commentators to label her a cold fish: one critic even called her work ‘autistic’. While there is certainly a cool, detached surface to her prose, read between the lines – and especially the commas – and you excavate powerful emotion. Here is a later work, the lovely ‘Head, Heart’:

Heart weeps.  
Head tries to help heart.  
Head tells heart how it is, again:  
You will lose the ones you love. They will all go. But even  
the earth will go, someday.  
Heart feels better, then.  
But the words of head do not remain long in the ears of heart.  
Heart is so new to this.  
I want them back, says heart.  
Head is all heart has.  
Help, head. Help heart.

These lines resound to ancient accents: the poetic dialogue, for example, as used by Andrew Marvell in *A Dialogue between Soul and Body*. While the intellect can draw on such antique wisdom, the heart is guided only by the immediacy of its feelings and hard-won experience. One could read it as Davis’s attempt to weight the understandings of classicism and romanticism (as Christopher Ricks once said of Larkin), between the consolations of the long perspective and exigencies of the moment. ‘Heart feels better, *then*’, but not for long. Davis resolves this gentle toing and froing

with another delicately placed comma in the measured climax: ‘Help, head. Help heart.’ Here the tone modulates from plaintive to soothing. The ultimate answer to the divide, she seems to say, is a form of collaboration between mind and body, thought and feeling. Perhaps Davis is a metaphysical (prose-writer) after all.

It seems Lydia Davis’s time has finally come: no longer a ‘writer’s writer’, she is a ‘reader’s writer’ at last. Having wowed the world with *The Collected Stories*, she is due to publish her new translation of *Madame Bovary* in November. There are doubtless more stories to come: Davis has said she has spent some time turning spam emails into poetry. *The Collected Stories* is the best place to start reading her work in all its oddness, humour and variety. Davis’s writing nags at the imagination in pleasant and quirky ways. It may not change your life exactly, but you’ll never quite look at the world in quite the same way again. To prove the point, I’ll give Davis the final words.

‘Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room’  
Your housekeeper *has been* Shelly. ♦

## Stories from Flaubert

by *Lydia Davis*

### *The Cook's Lesson*

Today I have learned a great lesson; our cook was my teacher. She is twenty-five years old and she's French. I discovered that she does not know that Louis-Philippe is no longer king of France and we now have a republic. And yet it has been five years since he left the throne. She said the fact that he is no longer king simply does not interest her in the least – those were her words.

And I think of myself as an intelligent man! But compared to her I'm an imbecile.

### *The Visit to the Dentist*

Last week I went to the dentist, thinking he was going to pull my tooth. He said it would be better to wait and see if the pain subsided.

Well, the pain did not subside – I was in agony and running a fever. So yesterday I went to have it pulled. On my way to see him, I had to cross the old marketplace where they used to execute people, not so long ago. I remembered that when I was only six or seven years old, returning home from school one day, I crossed the square after an execution had taken place. The guillotine was there. I saw fresh blood on the paving stones. They were carrying away the basket.

Last night I thought about how I had entered the square on my way to the dentist dreading what was about to happen to me,

and how, in the same way, those people condemned to death also used to enter that square dreading what was about to happen to them – though it was worse for them.

When I fell asleep I dreamed about the guillotine; the strange thing was that my little niece, who sleeps downstairs, also dreamed about a guillotine, though I hadn't said anything to her about it. I wonder if thoughts are fluid, and flow downward, from one person to another, within the same house.

### *The Coachman and the Worm*

A former servant of ours, a pathetic fellow, is now the driver of a hackney cab – you'll probably remember how he married the daughter of that porter who was awarded a prestigious prize at the same time that his wife was being sentenced to penal servitude for theft, whereas he, the porter, was actually the thief. In any case, this unfortunate man Tolet, our former servant, has, or thinks he has, a tapeworm inside him. He talks about it as though it were a living person who communicates with him and tells him what it wants, and when Tolet is talking to you, the word he always refers to this creature inside him. Sometimes Tolet has a sudden urge and attributes it to the tapeworm: "He wants it," he says – and right away Tolet obeys. Lately he wanted to eat some fresh white rolls; another time he had to have some white wine, but the next day he was outraged because he wasn't given red.

The poor man has by now lowered himself, in his own eyes, to the same level as the tapeworm; they are equals waging a fierce battle for dominance. He said to my sister-in-law lately, "That creature has it in for me; it's a battle of wills, you see; he's forcing me to do what he likes. But I'll have my revenge. Only one of us will be left alive." Well, the man is the one who will be left alive, or, rather, not for long, because, in order to kill the worm and be

rid of it, he recently swallowed a bottle of vitriol and is at this very moment dying. I wonder if you can see the true depths of this story.

What a strange thing it is – the human brain!

### ***The Chairs***

Louis has been in the church in Mantes looking at the chairs. He has been looking at them very closely. He wants to learn as much as he can about the people from looking at their chairs, he says. He started with the chair of a woman he calls Madame Fricotte. Maybe her name was written on the back of the chair. She must be very stout, he says – the seat of the chair has a deep hollow in it, and the prayer stool has been reinforced in a couple of places. Her husband may be a notary, because the prayer stool is upholstered in red velvet with brass tacks. Or, he thinks, the woman may be a widow, because there is no chair belonging to Monsieur Fricotte – unless he's an atheist. In fact, perhaps Madame Fricotte, if she is a widow, is looking for another husband, since the back of her chair is heavily stained with hair dye.

### ***Pouchet's Wife***

Tomorrow I will be going into Rouen for a funeral. Madame Pouchet, the wife of a doctor, died the day before yesterday in the street. She was on horseback, riding with her husband; she had a stroke and fell from the horse. I've been told I don't have much compassion for other people, but in this case I am very sad. Pouchet is a good man, though completely deaf and by nature not very cheerful. He doesn't see patients, but works in zoology. His wife was a pretty Englishwoman with a pleasant manner, who helped him a good deal in his work. She made drawings for him

and read his proofs; they went on trips together; she was a real companion. He loved her very much and will be devastated by his loss. Louis lives across the street from them. He happened to see the carriage that brought her home, and her son lifting her out; there was a handkerchief over her face. Just as she was being carried like that into the house, feet first, an errand boy came up. He was delivering a large bouquet of flowers she had ordered that morning. O Shakespeare! ♦

## Digital Pornography

by *Natasha Vargas-Cooper*

AS RECENTLY AS 15 years ago, if somebody wanted vivid depictions of, say, two men simultaneously performing anal penetration on the same woman, securing such a delicacy would require substantial effort because the pornographic repertoire was still limited by the costs and imprecision of distribution. Leaving aside matters of taste and propriety, just how big an audience of horny derelicts or hurried businessmen would wriggle into a Pussycat Theater, with its sticky floors, and, in the company of others, watch a double-anal double feature? Most likely, the producers were more comfortable knowing they could aggregate a much larger audience with an hour of good old-fashioned blow jobs and randy nurses. Even as porn migrated from film reels to videocassettes, there lingered some thorny logistical problems to overcome. The clunky videotape still had to be smuggled into the family residence, had to be viewed in a secured environment from which nosy children and spouses were barred, and then had to be stored in a crawl space, safe, or dedicated dungeon – or reluctantly tossed in the trash.

The difficulty of acquiring this material may have hinted at a great, and therefore pent-up, demand. Then, technology produced the Second Coming: the Internet. And then the Rapture itself: broadband. Pornography is now, indisputably, omnipresent: in 2007, a quarter of all Internet searches were related to pornography. Nielsen ratings showed that in January 2010, more

than a quarter of Internet users in the United States, almost 60 million people, visited a pornographic Web site. That number represents nearly a fifth of all the men, women, and children in this country – and it doesn't even take into account the incomprehensible amount of porn distributed through peer-to-peer downloading networks, shared hard drives, Internet chat rooms, and message boards.

So, perhaps it's no surprise that, for those who crave the more drastic masturbatory aid, the Internet offers easy access to a Grand Guignol of the outright bizarre (Midget Porn, Clown Porn, Girl-Fight Gang-Bang Porn). What is surprising is what now constitutes widely available, routine stuff in the major porn portals: episodes of men – or groups of men – having sex with women who are seven months pregnant; the ho-hum of husbands filming their scrawny white wives having sex with paunchy black men in budget motels; simulations of father-daughter (or mother-daughter) incest; and of course, a fixture on any well-trafficked site: double anal.

When a 13-year-old girl can sit in math class, hide her Hello Kitty smart phone behind her textbook, and pull up such an extreme video in less time than it would take her to text a vote for her favorite *American Idol* contestant, we've certainly reached some kind of new societal landmark. It's important, however, to distinguish between what has changed and what hasn't.

Porn's new pervasiveness and influence on the culture at large haven't necessarily introduced anything new into our sexual repertoire: humans, after all, have been having sex – weird, debased, and otherwise – for quite a while. But pervasive hardcore porn has allowed many people to flirt openly with practices that may have always been desired, but had been deeply buried under social restraint. Take anal sex: in a 1992 study that surveyed sexual behaviors, published by the University of Chicago, 20



percent of women ages 25 to 29 reported having anal sex. In a study published in October 2010 by the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University, the instances of anal sex reported by women in the same age cohort had more than doubled, to 46 percent. The practice has even made its way into the younger female demographic: the Indiana study shows 20 percent of 18- and 19-year-olds have had anal sex at least once.

One of the Indiana study's co-authors, Debby Herbenick, believes that Internet porn now "plays a role in how many Americans perceive and become educated about sex." How this influence actually works is speculative – no one can ever really know what other people do in their bedrooms or why. Some experts postulate a sort of monkey-see, monkey-do explanation, whereby both men and women are conforming to behaviors they witness on their browser media players. But in many ways this explanation doesn't account for the subtle relationship between now-ubiquitous pornography and sexuality. To take anal sex again, porn doesn't plant that idea in men's minds; instead, porn puts the power of a mass medium behind ancient male desires. Anal sex as a run-of-the-mill practice, *de rigueur* pubic waxing for girls – and their mothers – and first-date doggy-style encounters (this is but a small sampling of rapidly shifting sexual mores) have been popularized *and* legitimized by porn. Which means that men now have a far easier time broaching subjects once considered off-putting – for instance, suburban dads can offhandedly suggest anal sex to their bethonged, waxed wives.

Men, so the conventional wisdom goes, tend to desire more than women are willing to give them sexually. The granting of sex is the most powerful weapon women possess in their struggle with men. Yet in each new sexual negotiation a woman has with a man, she not only spends down that capital, she begins at a disadvantage, because the potential losses are always greater for

her. A failed or even successful single encounter can be life-altering. Whatever "social construct" you might impose upon the whole matter, nature imposes much more rigorous consequences on women than on men.

Over the years, different strategies have been offered so that women could avoid the more subjugating consequences of sex. Though methods of reversing the biological power dynamics between sexes date back to ancient Sparta, the premise had always been confined to the fringes of society until the sexual revolution of the 1960s, a period in which many feminists considered marriage the primary mechanism for women's sexual conscription. The liberation on offer was sexual freedom for women – and their partners – through open marriages and sex communes. It's worth noting that these polyamorous arrangements usually had at the center a male patriarch who reaped the perks of women's newfound freedom. This experiment was short-lived, as sexual jealousy seemed an impossible force to rationalize, and children conceived on the grounds of a canyon commune needed more stability than a group of wayward adults could provide.

But the reactionary political correctness of the 1990s put forth a proposition even more disastrous to women than free love: sexual equality. With the rise of PC culture, the notion of men and women as sexual equals has found a home in the mainstream. Two generations of women, my own included, soared into the game with the justifiable expectations of not only earning the same wage as a guy, but also inhabiting the sexual arena the way a man does.

Armed with a "Take Back the Night" pamphlet, we were led to believe that, as long as we avoided the hordes of date rapists, sex was an egalitarian endeavor. The key to sexual harmony, so the thinking went, was social conditioning. Men who sexually took

advantage of women were considered the storm troopers of patriarchy, but women could teach men to adopt a different ideology, through explicit communication of boundaries – “you can touch there” or “please don’t do that.” Thus was the dark drama of sex replaced with a verbal contract. Once the drunken frat boys and brutes were weeded out, if we gravitated toward a kind of enlightened guy, an emotionally rewarding sex life was ours for the taking. Sex wasn’t a bestial pursuit, but something elevating.

This is an intellectual swindle that leads women to misjudge male sexuality, which they do at their own emotional and physical peril. Male desire is not a malleable entity that can be constructed through politics, language, or media. Sexuality is not neutral. A warring dynamic based on power and subjugation has always existed between men and women, and the egalitarian view of sex, with its utopian pretensions, offers little insight into the typical male psyche. Internet porn, on the other hand, shows us an unvarnished (albeit partial) view of male sexuality as an often dark force streaked with aggression. The Internet has created a perfect market of buyers and sellers (with the sellers increasingly proffering their goods gratis) that provides what people – overwhelmingly males (who make up two-thirds of all porn viewers) – want to see or do.

The heated act of sex often expunges judgment, pushing the participants into territory they hadn’t previously contemplated. The speed at which one transgresses, the urge to reach oblivion, the glamour of violence, the arbitrary and shifting distinction between acts repulsive and attractive – all these aspects that existed only in sex are now re-created through Internet porn. You could be poking around for some no-frills Web clips of amateur couples doing it missionary style, but easily and rapidly you slide into footage of two women simultaneously working their crotches

on opposing ends of a double-sided dildo, and then all of a sudden you’re at a teenage-fisting Web site. All of this happens maybe by accident – those pop-ups can be misleading – or maybe, and more likely, it happens because in that moment it’s arousing, whether you like it or not. Consuming Internet porn, then, mimics many of the sensations found in sex. It’s overpowering and immediate; it is the brute force of male sexuality, unmasked and untethered. Martin Amis, in his fragmented fictional meditation on male depravity, *Yellow Dog*, depicts the delirious and uncontrollable effects of viewing porn. Amis writes:

*He slithered around in his chair and made a noise intended to drown something out – my God: pornography turned the world upside down. You gave your head away, and what your mind liked no longer mattered; now the animal parts were in the driving seat – and tall in the saddle.*

Hard-core porn, which is what Internet porn largely traffics in, is undoubtedly extreme. But how is sex, as a human experience, anything less than extreme? Not the kind of sex (or lack thereof) that occurs in marriages that double as domestic gulags. Or what 30-somethings do to each other in the second year of their “serious relationship.” But the sex that occurs in between relationships – or overlaps with relationships – where the buffers of intimacy or familiarity do not exist: the raw, unpracticed sort. If a woman thinks of the best sex she’s had in her life, she’s often thinking of this kind of sex, and while it may be the best sex in her life, it’s not the sex she wants to have throughout her life – or more accurately, it’s not the sex she’d have with the man with whom she’d like to spend her life. The manner in which one physically, and emotionally, contorts oneself for sex simply takes sex outside the realm of ordinary human experiences and places it in the extreme, often beyond our control. “Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness,” Susan Sontag wrote in *Styles of Radical Will*. Yes,

it's a natural, human function, and one from which both partners can derive enormous pleasure, but it is also one largely driven by brute male desire and therefore not at all free of violent, even cruel, urges.

At the heart of human sexuality, at least human sexuality involving men, lies what Freud identified in *Totem and Taboo* as "emotional ambivalence" – the simultaneous love and hate of the object of one's sexual affection. From that ambivalence springs the aggressive, hostile, and humiliating components of male sexual arousal.

Never was this made plainer to me than during a one-night stand with a man I had actually known for quite a while. A polite, educated fellow with a beautiful Lower East Side apartment invited me to a perfunctory dinner right after his long-term girlfriend had left him. We quickly progressed to his bed, and things did not go well. He couldn't stay aroused. Over the course of the tryst, I trotted out every parlor trick and sexual persona I knew. I was coquettish then submissive, vocal then silent, aggressive then downright commandeering; in a moment of exasperation, he asked if we could have anal sex. I asked why, seeing as how any straight man who has had experience with anal sex knows that it's a big production and usually has a lot of false starts and abrupt stops. He answered, almost without thought, "Because that's the only thing that will make you uncomfortable." This was, perhaps, the greatest moment of sexual honesty I've ever experienced – and without hesitation, I complied. This encounter proves an unpleasant fact that does not fit the feminist script on sexuality: pleasure and displeasure wrap around each other like two snakes.

Pornography, with its garish view of male sexual desire, bares an uncomfortable truth that the women's-liberation movement

has successfully suppressed: men and women have conflicting sexual agendas.

Pornography neatly resolves the contradictions – in favor of men. They copulate with impunity. Women never *dream* of staying. And if, God forbid, the women get pregnant, well, they can be used in pregnant pornos and then in an episode of *Exploited Moms*. What a marvelous means of delving into the heads of men. And for women peeping in on the Web, an important lesson – one that can't be gleaned in a sex-ed class where condoms are placed over bananas, nor from poring over the umpteenth edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* – is that sex can be a bitter, crushing experience, no matter how much power you think you have.

One of the most punishing realities women face when they reach sexual maturity is that their maturity is (at least to many men) unsexy. Indeed, we now have an entire genre of online smut politely called "Lolita Porn." This is not actual child pornography, a genre still blessedly beyond the reach of the casual Web browser. But nor is it porn in the *Barely Legal* tradition of women in their early 20s, tan and taut in pigtails, playing babysitters or high-school cheerleaders. (They might toss off a "Gee, mister!" to reinforce the fantasy, but only a desperate fool would accept this as truth.) Instead, Lolita Porn features girls who are 18 or older but look like 14-year-olds. They're pale, long-limbed girls, with pears for breasts, small pink flecks for nipples (in itself a sub-genre of online porn: Tiny Titties), and a hairless, nearly invisible pubic slit.

The mass distribution of such genres of Internet porn and their hard-core depictions of sex with the steady theme of humiliation have thrown current-day feminists into a scramble. The new neo-feminists (it's difficult to keep track of whatever wave the current "movement" is riding) argue that the primary

obstacle to women's gaining greater equality in the political and economic sphere is today's "hypersexuality," and specifically the spread of online porn. This is a somewhat new take on an old position. In the 1970s, second-wave feminists embraced an anti-porn militancy (a position closely identified with Andrea Dworkin). But that view was discredited by a new group of feminists who took up the mantra "Feminism means choice" – specifically, choice of lifestyle. Sex workers, strippers, corporate executives, and housewives, so the thinking went, all held the right to be liberated, "sex-positive," and even enthusiastic consumers of (pre-digital) porn.

This sex-positive stance became so widely accepted that, as Natasha Walter writes in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, by the 1990s, "the classic feminist critique of pornography" had "disappeared from view." That might not have been a wholly negative development, because feminism's simplistic argument that porn objectified women was, for Walter, *too* simplistic. But the spread of Internet porn – a far cry from the Hefner-published glossies of the mid-20th century – has reignited a 40-year debate, and the new-new feminists are horrified to have found that in some way they were, albeit temporarily, in bed with the sex industry. Now they are in lockstep retreat. And in fact they've reached a new consensus: the ubiquity of pornography has brought the sex industry out of the margins and into the mainstream, and we're all the worse off for it. Walter asserts:

*In this generation a certain view of female sexuality has become celebrated throughout advertisements, music, television programmes, films and magazines. This image of female sexuality has become more than ever defined by the terms of the sex industry.*

Walter is correct that beauty standards in advertising and entertainment are unattainable, but she mischaracterizes what the images coming out of the "sex industry" actually look like today –

Walter and so many other women writers who didn't grow up with the Internet miss the fact that Internet porn has fundamentally changed the way sexuality is transmitted back to us. For instance, in her 2005 review of a documentary about *Deep Throat* (a movie that in today's world of porn might be rated PG-13), Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis compared porn to science fiction: "Like sci-fi, porn replaces existing realities with wild alternative universes (against which to measure the lackluster, repressive world we've inherited)." But instead of a sexual ecosystem populated by an overheated species of Amazon women and ponytailed men, the Internet porn aesthetic verges on unvarnished realism.

It seems like almost every teenager in America – and hardly just the teenagers – has heard of or taken a dip into sites like RedTube and YouPorn, which alone account for roughly 2 percent of all daily Internet traffic. These are free, open, enormous sites, in which anybody can upload, distribute, and view whatever porn they please; even porn in which they star. It's amateur hour – and like all amateur hours, it's an honest, if often not-pretty, catalog of the desires and insecurities of regular folk.

And it's largely a grim parade of what women will do to satisfy men: young wives fingering themselves on the family couch, older wives offering themselves to their hubby's Army buddies, aging moms in shabby corsets shoving their sagging rear ends into the camera. When it comes to contemporary porn, you don't have to look like a porn star to be sexually desired. Indeed, porn stars no longer look like porn stars. The image of Jenna Jameson, America's most famous professional porn star (and a best-selling author) – with her comically huge breasts, overextended blond extensions, and artificially tanned skin – has been supplanted by the new face of pornography: a pale, naughty, 19-year-old with A-

cups and a bad haircut, her face illuminated only by the bluish glow of her Mac.

This populist, utilitarian quality of homegrown porn is now obligingly mimicked by threatened professional porn productions: bald, one-off quality, whitewashed by unfiltered lights, sickly hues, and indifferent composition. This amateur aesthetic pervades porn where the viewer is put directly in the scene: always hard core, mostly close-ups, no plot or dialogue, just screwing. Some of the most popular sites of the past five years – the Bang Bus, Captain Stabbin, Mike’s Apartment – all feature vignettes based on the same premise: the pornographer plays a pornographer and the actresses play eager actresses who, either willingly or with a bit of cajoling, have sex with the pornographer (without musical accompaniment). Seasoned porn stars, to succeed, must now play the role of amateur, aspiring porn stars.

Gail Dines, author of *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, frets that the overwhelming exposure to emotionless, rapacious sex on the Internet will socialize men to find degradation of women sexually arousing. She writes,

*Porn is actually being encoded into a boy’s sexual identity so that an authentic sexuality – one that develops organically out of life experiences, one’s peer group, personality traits, family and community affiliations – is replaced by a generic porn sexuality limited in creativity and lacking any sense of love, respect or connection to another human being.*

First, I have yet to see a single credible study that links proliferation of pornography to an increase in abuse of women. More important, the sort of sex that Dines envisions – where respect, love, and civic connections are merged into erotically rewarding experience – is utopian (and not perhaps all that enticing). Dines ignores the fact that men behave differently than women. It wasn’t just Ward Cleaver-type stuffiness that prompted generations of dads to warn their daughters not to get

into cars with boys. Dads are grown men, and they know that when it comes to sex, most men will take every inch a woman yields.

If the shadowy cabal of Internet pornographers posited by Dines were not able to use 30-second clips of porn as bread crumbs to entice men away from their true sexual personas, what sort of “authentic sexuality” would males possess? Dines seems to have in mind a Rousseauistic pygmy race of sexually neutered males; perhaps many feminists (and perhaps many fathers of daughters, and perhaps many sensible and civilized people, for that matter) would applaud this emasculated masculinity as progress – but we’re never going to achieve it. While sexual aggression and the desire to debase women may not be what arouse all men, they are certainly an animating force of male sexuality. They may be unattractive and even, if taken to extremes, dangerous, but they’re not, perhaps alas, deviant. Leaving aside for the moment the argument that some things that might be sordid and even ugly can also be arousing and satisfying, the main problem with the new anti-porn critics is their naive assumption that if only we could blot out Internet porn, then the utopia of sexual equality would be achieved. But equality in sex can’t be achieved. Internet porn exposes that reality; it may even intensify that reality; it doesn’t create it.

This isn’t to argue that pornography is harmless or even that it shouldn’t be censored: its pervasiveness clearly exacerbates the growing moral nihilism of our culture. But removing pornography won’t alter the unlovely aspects of male sexuality that porn depicts and legitimizes. The history of civilization would seem to show that there’s no hope of eradicating those qualities; they can only be contained – and checked – by strenuously enforced norms. And given our à la carte morality and our aversion to cultural

authority – a societal direction made plain by porn’s very omnipresence – I wouldn’t put much faith in enforcement.

Even the crudest of online porn captures only a slice of the less-than-uplifting aspects of the sexual experience, because porn not only eschews but actively conceals this singular truth: the most brutalizing aspects of sex are not physical. This is made plain by the great, filthy, but far from pornographic *Last Tango in Paris*, which Pauline Kael described as the “most powerfully erotic movie ever made.” In Bernardo Bertolucci’s story, Paul, played by an age-ravaged but still sexually menacing Marlon Brando, decides to rent a flat in an attempt to escape his grief over his wife’s recent suicide. When Paul goes to look at an empty apartment, he meets Jeanne, a petite 20-year-old bride-to-be who is also searching for an apartment. The two have sex without even knowing each other’s names, and this begins their four-day encounter.

Paul insists that the two meet only at the apartment, only have sex, and say nothing about their lives. Jeanne halfheartedly accepts (she constantly comes up against Paul’s rules, begging for more details about him and offering unsolicited morsels about her life). Paul works out his grief by debasing himself and her. “He demands total subservience to his sexual wishes,” Kael writes. “This enslavement is for him the sexual truth, the real thing, sex without phoniness.” In one scene, Paul asks Jeanne if she would be willing to eat vomit as proof of her love for him. Adoringly, she says yes. Jeanne experiences the full brunt of Paul’s sexual aggression and violence when, while she attempts to resist, Paul pulls down her jeans, pins her to the floor, and has rough anal sex with her, using butter as a lubricant.

Jeanne accepts all of Paul’s manic pronouncements, sexual roughhousing, and torment, either because of her own naïveté or, perhaps, as a response to Paul’s authentic desperation. When

Paul’s wife’s body is finally ready for burial, he gives up the apartment and tells Jeanne that he wants to know her name and he is ready to love her. As the picture of Paul comes more sharply into focus, Jeanne ultimately rejects him not because of his brutishness, but because of his banality. Paul is a morose wash-up, a widower in his 40s who runs a flophouse. His excessive masculinity quickly withers when exposed to the air outside the barren flat.

What makes *Last Tango* so devastating and resonant is not the sex acts, for which the movie is often remembered, but rather the common but annihilating emotions that fuel them: desperation and loneliness. It’s the clash between vulnerability and indifference that transpires after sex that is so savage. This is what Kael called “realism with the terror of actual experience.” The most frightening truths about sex rarely exist in the physical, but instead live in the intangible yet indelible wounds created in the psyche. Go try to find that on the Internet. ♦

## Skyscrapers Can Save the City

by *Edward Glaeser*

**B**ESIDES MAKING cities more affordable and architecturally interesting, tall buildings are greener than sprawl, and they foster social capital and creativity. Yet some urban planners and preservationists seem to have a misplaced fear of heights that yields damaging restrictions on how tall a building can be. From New York to Paris to Mumbai, there's a powerful case for building up, not out.

In the Book of Genesis, the builders of Babel declared, "Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered upon the face of the whole earth." These early developers correctly understood that cities could connect humanity. But God punished them for monumentalizing terrestrial, rather than celestial, glory. For more than 2,000 years, Western city builders took this story's warning to heart, and the tallest structures they erected were typically church spires. In the late Middle Ages, the wool-making center of Bruges became one of the first places where a secular structure, a 354-foot belfry built to celebrate cloth-making, towered over nearby churches. But elsewhere another four or five centuries passed before secular structures surpassed religious ones. With its 281-foot spire, Trinity Church was the tallest building in New York City until 1890. Perhaps that year, when Trinity's spire was eclipsed by a skyscraper built to house Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*,

should be seen as the true start of the irreligious 20th century. At almost the same time, Paris celebrated its growing wealth by erecting the 1,000-foot Eiffel Tower, which was 700 feet taller than the Cathedral of Notre-Dame.

Since that tower in Babel, height has been seen both as a symbol of power and as a way to provide more space on a fixed amount of land. The belfry of Trinity Church and Gustave Eiffel's tower did not provide usable space. They were massive monuments to God and to French engineering, respectively. Pulitzer's World Building was certainly a monument to Pulitzer, but it was also a relatively practical means of getting his growing news operation into a single building.

For centuries, ever taller buildings have made it possible to cram more and more people onto an acre of land. Yet until the 19th century, the move upward was a moderate evolution, in which two-story buildings were gradually replaced by four- and six-story buildings. Until the 19th century, heights were restricted by the cost of building and the limits on our desire to climb stairs. Church spires and belfry towers could pierce the heavens, but only because they were narrow and few people other than the occasional bell-ringer had to climb them. Tall buildings became possible in the 19th century, when American innovators solved the twin problems of safely moving people up and down and creating tall buildings without enormously thick lower walls.

Elisha Otis didn't invent the elevator; Archimedes is believed to have built one 2,200 years ago. And Louis XV is said to have had a personal lift installed in Versailles so that he could visit his mistress. But before the elevator could become mass transit, it needed a good source of power, and it needed to be safe. Matthew Boulton and James Watt provided the early steam engines used to power industrial elevators, which were either pulled up by ropes or pushed up hydraulically. As engines improved, so did the speed

and power of elevators that could haul coal out of mines or grain from boats.

But humans were still wary of traveling long distances upward in a machine that could easily break and send them hurtling downward. Otis, tinkering in a sawmill in Yonkers, took the danger out of vertical transit. He invented a safety brake and presented it in 1854 at New York's Crystal Palace Exposition. He had himself hoisted on a platform, and then, dramatically, an axman severed the suspending rope. The platform dropped slightly, then came to a halt as the safety brake engaged.

The Otis elevator became a sensation. In the 1870s, it enabled pathbreaking structures, like Richard Morris Hunt's Tribune Building in New York, to reach 10 stories. Across the Atlantic, London's 269-foot St. Pancras Station was taller even than the Tribune Building. But the fortress-like appearance of St. Pancras hints at the building's core problem. It lacks the critical cost-reducing ingredient of the modern skyscraper: a load-bearing steel skeleton. Traditional buildings, like St. Pancras or the Tribune Building, needed extremely strong lower walls to support their weight. The higher a building went, the thicker its lower walls had to be, and that made costs almost prohibitive, unless you were building a really narrow spire.

The load-bearing steel skeleton, which pretty much defines a skyscraper, applies the same engineering principles used in balloon-frame houses, which reduced the costs of building throughout rural 19th-century America. A balloon-frame house uses a light skeleton made of standardized boards to support its weight. The walls are essentially hung on the frame like a curtain. Skyscrapers also rest their weight on a skeleton frame, but in this case the frame is made of steel, which became increasingly affordable in the late 19th century.

There is a lively architectural debate about who invented the skyscraper – reflecting the fact that the skyscraper, like most other gifts of the city, didn't occur in a social vacuum, and did not occur all at once. William Le Baron Jenney's 138-foot Home Insurance Building, built in Chicago in 1885, is often seen as the first true skyscraper. But Jenney's skyscraper didn't have a complete steel skeleton. It just had two iron-reinforced walls. Other tall buildings in Chicago, such as the Montauk Building, designed by Daniel Burnham and John Root and built two years earlier, had already used steel reinforcement. Industrial structures, like the McCullough Shot and Lead Tower in New York and the St. Ouen dock warehouse near Paris, had used iron frames decades before.

Jenney's proto-skyscraper was a patchwork, stitching together his own innovations with ideas that were in the air in Chicago, a city rich with architects. Other builders, like Burnham and Root, their engineer George Fuller, and Louis Sullivan, a former Jenney apprentice, then further developed the idea. Sullivan's great breakthrough came in 1891, when he put up the Wainwright Building in St. Louis, a skyscraper free from excessive ornamental masonry. Whereas Jenney's buildings evoke the Victorian era, the Wainwright Building points the way toward the modernist towers that now define so many urban skylines.

Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* is believed to be loosely based on the early life of Sullivan's apprentice Frank Lloyd Wright. Sullivan and Wright are depicted as lone eagles, Gary Cooper heroes, paragons of individualism. They weren't. They were great architects deeply enmeshed in an urban chain of innovation. Wright riffed on Sullivan's idea of form following function, Sullivan riffed on Jenney, and they all borrowed the wisdom of Peter B. Wight, who produced great innovations in fireproofing. Their collective creation – the skyscraper – enabled cities to add vast amounts of floor space using the same amount



of ground area. Given the rising demand for center-city real estate, the skyscraper seemed like a godsend. The problem was that those city centers already had buildings on them. Except in places like Chicago, where fire had created a tabula rasa, cities needed to tear down to build up.

The demand for space was even stronger in New York than in Chicago, and skyscrapers were soon springing up in Manhattan. In 1890, Pulitzer's World Building had some steel framing, but its weight was still supported by seven-foot-thick masonry walls. In 1899, the Park Row Building soared over the World Building, to 391 feet, supported by a steel skeleton. Daniel Burnham traveled east to build his iconic Flatiron Building in 1902, and several years later, Wight's National Academy of Design was torn down to make way for the 700-foot Metropolitan Life tower, then the tallest building in the world. In 1913, the Woolworth Building reached 792 feet, and it remained the world's tallest until the boom of the late '20s.

Those tall buildings were not mere monuments. They enabled New York to grow and industries to expand. They gave factory owners and workers space that was both more humane and more efficient. Manhattan's master builders, such as A. E. Lefcourt, made that possible.

Like a proper Horatio Alger figure, Lefcourt was born poor and started work as a newsboy and bootblack. By his teenage years, he had saved enough cash to buy a \$1,000 U.S. Treasury bond, which he kept pinned inside his shirt. At 25, Lefcourt took over his employer's wholesale business, and over the next decade he became a leading figure in the garment industry.

In 1910, Lefcourt began a new career as a real-estate developer, putting all of his capital into a 12-story loft building on West 25th Street for his own company. He built more such buildings, and helped move his industry from the old sweatshops

into the modern Garment District. The advantage of the garment industry's old home downtown had been its proximity to the port. Lefcourt's new Garment District lay between Grand Central and Pennsylvania stations, anchored by the rail lines that continued to give New York a transportation advantage. Transportation technologies shape cities, and Midtown Manhattan was built around two great rail stations that could carry in legions of people.

Over the next 20 years, Lefcourt would erect more than 30 edifices, many of them skyscrapers. He used those Otis elevators in soaring towers that covered 150 acres, encased 100 million cubic feet, and contained as many workers as Trenton. "He demolished more historical landmarks in New York City than any other man had dared to contemplate," *The Wall Street Journal* wrote. In the early 1920s, the New York of slums, tenements, and Gilded Age mansions was transformed into a city of skyscrapers, as builders like Lefcourt erected nearly 100,000 new housing units each year, enabling the city to grow and to stay reasonably affordable.

By 1928, Lefcourt's real-estate wealth had made him a billionaire in today's dollars. He celebrated by opening a national bank bearing his own name. Lefcourt's optimism was undiminished by the stock-market crash, and he planned \$50 million of construction for 1930, sure that it would be a "great building year." But as New York's economy collapsed, so did his real-estate empire, which was sold off piecemeal to pay his investors. He died in 1932 worth only \$2,500, seemingly punished, like the builders of Babel, for his hubris.

I suspect that Lefcourt, like many developers, cared more about his structural legacy than about cash. Those structures helped house the creative minds that still make New York special. His most famous building, which doesn't even bear his name, came to symbolize an entire musical style: the "Brill Building

Sound.” In the late 1950s and early ’60s, artists connected in the Brill Building, producing a string of hits like “Twist and Shout,” “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’,” and, fittingly enough, “Up on the Roof.” Cities are ultimately about the connections between people, and structures – like those built by Lefcourt – make those connections possible. By building up, Lefcourt made the lives of garment workers far more pleasant and created new spaces for creative minds.



NEW YORK’s upward trajectory was not without its detractors. In 1913, the distinguished chairman of the Fifth Avenue Commission, who was himself an architect, led a fight to “save Fifth Avenue from ruin.” At that time, Fifth Avenue was still a street of stately mansions owned by Carnegies and Rockefellers. The anti-growth activists argued that unless heights were restricted to 125 feet or less, Fifth Avenue would become a canyon, with ruinous results for property values and the city as a whole. Similar arguments have been made by the enemies of change throughout history. The chair of the commission was a better architect than prognosticator, as density has suited Fifth Avenue quite nicely.

In 1915, between Broadway and Nassau Street, in the heart of downtown New York, the Equitable Life Assurance Society constructed a monolith that contained well over a million square

feet of office space and, at about 540 feet, cast a seven-acre shadow on the city. The building became a rallying cry for the enemies of height, who wanted to see a little more sun. A political alliance came together and passed the city’s landmark 1916 zoning ordinance, which allowed buildings to rise only if they gave up girth. New York’s many ziggurat-like structures, which get narrower as they get taller, were constructed to fulfill the setback requirements of that ordinance.

The code changed the shape of buildings, but it did little to stop the construction boom of the 1920s. Really tall buildings provide something of an index of irrational exuberance. Five of the 10 tallest buildings standing in New York City in 2009 – including the Empire State Building – were completed between 1930 and ’33. In the go-go years of the late ’20s, when the city’s potential seemed unlimited, builders like Lefcourt were confident they could attract tenants, and their bankers were happy to lend. The builders of the Chrysler Building, 40 Wall Street, and the Empire State Building engaged in a great race to produce the tallest structure in the world. It is an odd fact that two of New York’s tallest and most iconic edifices were built with money made from selling the cars that would move America away from vertical cities to sprawling suburbs. As it turned out, the winner, the Empire State Building, was soon nicknamed the “Empty State

Building” – it was neither fully occupied nor profitable until the 1940s. Luckily for its financiers, the building’s construction had come in way below budget.

New York slowed its construction of skyscrapers after 1933, and its regulations became ever more complex. Between 1916 and 1960, the city’s original zoning code was amended more than 2,500 times. In 1961, the City Planning Commission passed a new zoning resolution that significantly increased the limits on building. The resulting 420-page code replaced a simple classification of space – business, residential, unrestricted – with a dizzying number of different districts, each of which permitted only a narrow range of activities. There were 13 types of residential district, 12 types of manufacturing district, and no fewer than 41 types of commercial district.

Each type of district narrowly classified the range of permissible activities. Commercial art galleries were forbidden in residential districts but allowed in manufacturing districts, while noncommercial art galleries were forbidden in manufacturing districts but allowed in residential districts. Art-supply stores were forbidden in residential districts and some commercial districts. Parking-space requirements also differed by district. In an R5 district, a hospital was required to have one off-street parking spot for every five beds, but in an R6 district, a hospital had to have one space for every eight beds. The picayune detail of the code is exemplified by its control of signs: For multiple dwellings, including apartment hotels, or for permitted non-residential buildings or other structures, one identification sign, with an area not exceeding 12 square feet and indicating only the name of the permitted use, the name or address of the building, or the name of the management thereof, is permitted.

The code also removed the system of setbacks and replaced it with a complex system based on the floor-to-area ratio, or FAR,

which is the ratio of interior square footage to ground area. A maximum FAR of two, for example, meant that a developer could put a two-story building on his entire plot or a four-story building on half of the plot. In residential districts R1, R2, and R3, the maximum floor-to-area ratio was 0.5. In R9 districts, the maximum FAR was about 7.5, depending on the building height. The height restriction was eased for builders who created plazas or other public spaces at the front of the building. While the standard building created by the 1916 code was a wedding cake that started at the sidewalk, the standard building created by the 1961 code was a glass-and-steel slab with an open plaza in front.

New York’s zoning codes were getting more rigorous, but so were other restrictions on development. After World War II, New York made private development more difficult by overregulating construction and rents, while building a bevy of immense public structures, such as Stuyvesant Town and Lincoln Center.

But then, during the 1950s and ’60s, both public and private projects ran into growing resistance from grassroots organizers like Jane Jacobs, who were becoming adept at mounting opposition to large-scale development. In 1961, Jacobs published her masterpiece, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which investigates and celebrates the pedestrian world of mid-20th-century New York. She argued that mixed-use zoning fostered street life, the essence of city living. But Jacobs liked protecting old buildings because of a confused piece of economic reasoning. She thought that preserving older, shorter structures would somehow keep prices affordable for budding entrepreneurs. That’s not how supply and demand works. Protecting an older one-story building instead of replacing it with a 40-story building does not preserve affordability. Indeed, opposing new building is the surest way to make a popular area unaffordable. An increase in the supply of houses, or anything else, almost always drives

prices down, while restricting the supply of real estate keeps prices high.

The relationship between housing supply and affordability isn't just a matter of economic theory. A great deal of evidence links the supply of space with the cost of real estate. Simply put, the places that are expensive don't build a lot, and the places that build a lot aren't expensive. Perhaps a new 40-story building won't itself house any quirky, less profitable firms, but by providing new space, the building will ease pressure on the rest of the city. Price increases in gentrifying older areas will be muted because of new construction. Growth, not height restrictions and a fixed building stock, keeps space affordable and ensures that poorer people and less profitable firms can stay and help a thriving city remain successful and diverse. Height restrictions do increase light, and preservation does protect history, but we shouldn't pretend that these benefits come without a cost.

In 1962, in response to the outcry over the razing of the original Pennsylvania Station, which was beautiful and much beloved, Mayor Robert Wagner established the Landmarks Preservation Commission. In 1965, despite vigorous opposition from the real-estate industry, the commission became permanent. Initially, this seemed like a small sop to preservationists. The number of buildings landmarked in the commission's first year, 1,634, was modest, and the commission's power was checked by the city council, which could veto its decisions.

Yet, like entropy, the reach of governmental agencies often expands over time, so that a mild, almost symbolic group can come to influence vast swaths of a city. By 2008, more than 15 percent of Manhattan's non-park land south of 96th Street was in a historic district, where every external change must be approved by the commission. By the end of 2010, the commission had

jurisdiction over 27,000 landmarked buildings and 101 historic districts.

In 2006, the developer Aby Rosen proposed putting a glass tower of more than 20 stories atop the old Sotheby Parke-Bernet building at 980 Madison Avenue, in the Upper East Side Historic District. Rosen and his Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Lord Norman Foster, wanted to erect the tower above the original building, much as the MetLife Building (formerly the Pan Am Building) rises above Grand Central Terminal. The building was not itself landmarked, but well-connected neighbors didn't like the idea of more height, and they complained to the commission. Tom Wolfe, who has written brilliantly about the caprices of both New York City and the real-estate industry, wrote a 3,500-word op-ed in *The New York Times* warning the landmarks commission against approving the project. Wolfe & Company won. In response to his critics in the 980 Madison Avenue case, of whom I was one, Wolfe was quoted in *The Village Voice* as saying: To take [Glaeser's] theory to its logical conclusion would be to develop Central Park ... When you consider the thousands and thousands of people who could be housed in Central Park if they would only allow them to build it up, boy, the problem is on the way to being solved!

But one of the advantages of building up in already dense neighborhoods is that you don't have to build in green areas, whether in Central Park or somewhere far from an urban center. From the preservationist perspective, building up in one area reduces the pressure to take down other, older buildings. One could quite plausibly argue that if members of the landmarks commission have decided that a building can be razed, then they should demand that its replacement be as tall as possible.

The cost of restricting development is that protected areas have become more expensive and more exclusive. In 2000, people

who lived in historic districts in Manhattan were on average almost 74 percent wealthier than people who lived outside such areas. Almost three-quarters of the adults living in historic districts had college degrees, as opposed to 54 percent outside them. People living in historic districts were 20 percent more likely to be white. The well-heeled historic-district denizens who persuade the landmarks commission to prohibit taller structures have become the urban equivalent of those restrictive suburbanites who want to mandate five-acre lot sizes to keep out the riffraff. It's not that poorer people could ever afford 980 Madison Avenue, but restricting new supply anywhere makes it more difficult for the city to accommodate demand, and that pushes up prices everywhere.

Again, the basic economics of housing prices are pretty simple – supply and demand. New York and Mumbai and London all face increasing demand for their housing, but how that demand affects prices depends on supply. Building enough homes eases the impact of rising demand and makes cities more affordable. That's the lesson of both Houston today and New York in the 1920s. In the post-war boom years between 1955 and 1964, Manhattan issued permits for an average of more than 11,000 new housing units each year. Between 1980 and '99, when the city's prices were soaring, Manhattan approved an average of 3,100 new units per year. Fewer new homes meant higher prices; between 1970 and 2000, the median price of a Manhattan housing unit increased by 284 percent in constant dollars.

The other key factor in housing economics is the cost of building a home. The cheapest way to deliver new housing is in the form of mass-produced two-story homes, which typically cost only about \$84 a square foot to erect. That low cost explains why Atlanta and Dallas and Houston are able to supply so much new

housing at low prices, and why so many Americans have ended up buying affordable homes in those places.

Building up is more costly, especially when elevators start getting involved. And erecting a skyscraper in New York City involves additional costs (site preparation, legal fees, a fancy architect) that can push the price even higher. But many of these are fixed costs that don't increase with the height of the building. In fact, once you've reached the seventh floor or so, building up has its own economic logic, since those fixed costs can be spread over more apartments. Just as the cost of a big factory can be covered by a sufficiently large production run, the cost of site preparation and a hotshot architect can be covered by building up. The actual marginal cost of adding an extra square foot of living space at the top of a skyscraper in New York is typically less than \$400. Prices do rise substantially in ultra-tall buildings – say, over 50 stories – but for ordinary skyscrapers, it doesn't cost more than \$500,000 to put up a nice 1,200-square-foot apartment. The land costs something, but in a 40-story building with one 1,200-square-foot unit per floor, each unit is using only 30 square feet of Manhattan – less than a thousandth of an acre. At those heights, the land costs become pretty small. If there were no restrictions on new construction, then prices would eventually come down to somewhere near construction costs, about \$500,000 for a new apartment. That's a lot more than the \$210,000 that it costs to put up a 2,500-square-foot house in Houston – but a lot less than the \$1 million or more that such an apartment often costs in Manhattan.

Land is also pretty limited in Chicago's Gold Coast, on the shores of Lake Michigan. Demand may not be the same as in Manhattan, but it's still pretty high. Yet you can buy a beautiful condominium with a lake view for roughly half the cost of a similar unit in Manhattan. Building in Chicago is cheaper than in

New York – but it's not twice as cheap. The big cost difference is that Chicago's leadership has always encouraged new construction more than New York's (at least before the Bloomberg administration). The forest of cranes along Lake Michigan keeps Chicago affordable.

Most people who fight to stop a new development think of themselves as heroes, not villains. After all, a plan to put up a new building on Madison Avenue clearly bugs a lot of people, and preventing one building isn't going to make much difference to the city as a whole. The problem is that all those independent decisions to prohibit construction add up. Zoning rules, air rights, height restrictions, and landmarks boards together form a web of regulation that has made building more and more difficult. The increasing wave of regulations was, until the Bloomberg administration, making New York shorter. In a sample of condominium buildings, I found that more than 80 percent of Manhattan's residential buildings built in the 1970s had more than 20 stories. But less than 40 percent of the buildings put up in the 1990s were that tall. The elevator and the steel-framed skyscraper made it possible to get vast amounts of living space onto tiny amounts of land, but New York's building rules were limiting that potential.

The growth in housing supply determines not only prices but the number of people in a city. The statistical relationship between new building and population growth within a given area is almost perfect, so that when an area increases its housing stock by 1 percent, its population rises by almost exactly that proportion. As a result, when New York or Boston or Paris restricts construction, its population will be smaller. If the restrictions become strong enough, then a city can even lose population, despite rising demand, as wealthier, smaller families replace poorer, larger ones.

Jane Jacobs's insights into the pleasures and strengths of older, shorter urban neighborhoods were certainly correct, but she had too little faith in the strengths of even-higher density levels. I was born a year before Jacobs left New York for Toronto, and I lived in Manhattan for the next 17 years. Yet my neighborhood looked nothing like low-rise Greenwich Village. I grew up surrounded by white glazed towers built after World War II to provide affordable housing for middle-income people like my parents. The neighborhood may not have been as charming as Greenwich Village, but it had plenty of fun restaurants, quirky stores, and even-quirkier pedestrians. The streets were reasonably safe. It was certainly a functioning, vibrant urban space, albeit one with plenty of skyscrapers.



**W**HEN BARON HAUSMANN thoroughly rebuilt Paris in the mid-19th century at the behest of Napoleon III, he did things unthinkable in a more democratic age: He evicted vast numbers of the poor, turning their homes into the wide boulevards that made Paris monumental. He lopped off a good

chunk of the Luxembourg Gardens to create city streets. He tore down ancient landmarks, including much of the Île de la Cité. He spent 2.5 billion francs on his efforts, which was 44 times the total budget of Paris in 1851. All of that spending and upheaval turned Paris from an ancient and somewhat dilapidated city of great poverty into an urban resort for the growing haute bourgeoisie.

He also made Paris a bit taller, boosting the Bourbon-era height limit on buildings from 54 feet to 62 feet. Still, relative to cities built in the elevator-rich 20th century, Haussmann's Paris stayed short, because people needed to climb stairs. Height restrictions were lifted in 1967, and construction of Paris's first proper skyscraper, the 689-foot Montparnasse Tower, didn't begin until 1969. Two years later, Les Halles, a popular open-air marketplace, was wiped away and the futuristic Centre Pompidou museum was begun. But these changes rankled those Parisians who had gotten used to a static city. The Montparnasse Tower was widely loathed, and the lesson drawn was that skyscrapers must never again mar central Paris. Les Halles was sorely missed, in much the same way that many New Yorkers mourned the demise of the old Penn Station. France is a far more regulatory country than America, and when its rulers decide they don't want change, change will not occur. In 1974, a height limit of 83 feet was imposed in central Paris.

But while these rules restricted height in old Paris, they let buildings grow on the periphery. Today, the majority of Paris's skyscrapers are in relatively dense but far-flung complexes like La Défense, which is three miles northwest of the Arc de Triomphe. La Défense is as vertical as central Paris is flat. It has about 35 million square feet of commercial space and the feel of an American office park. Except for the distant view of the Arc, administrative assistants drinking lattes in a Starbucks there could easily be in a bigger version of Crystal City, Virginia.

La Défense addresses the need to balance preservation and growth by segregating skyscrapers. In some senses, it is an inspired solution. People working there can still get to old Paris in about 20 minutes by Métro or in an hour on foot. That Métro line means that businesses in La Défense can connect with the all-important French bureaucracy that remains centered in the old city. La Défense is one of Europe's most concentrated commercial centers, and it seems to have all of the economic excitement that we would expect from such a mass of skilled workers. The sector enables Paris to grow, while keeping the old city pristine.

But building in La Défense is not a perfect substitute for new construction in the more-desirable central areas of Paris, where short supply keeps housing prices astronomical. The natural thing is to have tall buildings in the center, where demand is greatest, not on the edge. The lack of new housing in central Paris means that small apartments can sell for \$1 million or more. Hotel rooms often cost more than \$500 a night. If you want to be in the center of the city, you'll have to pay for it. People are willing to pay those high prices, because Paris is so charming, but they wouldn't have to if the city's rulers hadn't decided to limit the amount of housing that can be built in the area. Average people are barred from living in central Paris just as surely as if the city had put up a gate and said that no middle-income people can enter.

For the world's oldest, most beautiful cities, La Défense provides a viable model. Keep the core areas historic, but let millions of square feet be built nearby. As long as building in the high-rise district is sufficiently unfettered, then that area provides a safety valve for the region as a whole. The key issue with La Défense is whether it is too far away. Its distance from the old city keeps central Paris pristine, but it deprives too many people of the pleasures of strolling to a traditional café for lunch.

Unfortunately, there's no easy way to balance the benefits of providing additional desirable space with the need to preserve a beautiful older city. I wish that some developments like La Défense had been built closer to the center of Paris. But I also understand those who think Paris is so precious that more space should be maintained between the developments and Haussmann's boulevards.

Paris, however, is an extreme case. In much of the rest of the world, the argument for restricting development is far weaker. And nowhere have limits on development done more harm than in the Indian mega-city of Mumbai.

It's a pity that so few ordinary people can afford to live in central Paris or Manhattan, but France and the U.S. will survive. The problems caused by arbitrarily restricting height in the developing world are far more serious, because they handicap the metropolises that help turn desperately poor nations into middle-income countries. The rules that keep India's cities too short and too expensive mean that too few Indians can connect, with each other and with the outside world, in the urban places that are making that poor country richer. Since poverty often means death in the developing world, and since restricting city growth ensures more poverty, it is not hyperbole to say that land-use planning in India can be a matter of life and death.

Mumbai is a city of astonishing human energy and entrepreneurship, from the high reaches of finance and film to the jam-packed spaces of the Dharavi slum. All of this private talent deserves a public sector that performs the core tasks of city government – like providing sewers and safe water – without overreaching and overregulating. One curse of the developing world is that governments take on too much and fail at their main responsibilities. A country that cannot provide clean water for its citizens should not be in the business of regulating film dialogue.

The public failures in Mumbai are as obvious as the private successes. Western tourists can avoid the open-air defecation in Mumbai's slums, but they can't avoid the city's failed transportation network. Driving the 15 miles from the airport to the city's old downtown, with its landmark Gateway of India arch, can easily take 90 minutes. There is a train that could speed your trip, but few Westerners have the courage to brave its crowds during rush hour. In 2008, more than three people each working day were pushed out of that train to their death. Average commute times in Mumbai are roughly 50 minutes each way, which is about double the average American commute.

The most cost-effective means of opening up overcrowded city streets would be to follow Singapore and charge more for their use. If you give something away free, people will use too much of it. Mumbai's roads are just too valuable to be clogged up by ox carts at rush hour, and the easiest way to get flexible drivers off the road is to charge them for their use of public space. Congestion charges aren't just for rich cities; they are appropriate anywhere traffic comes to a standstill. After all, Singapore was not wealthy in 1975, when it started charging drivers for using downtown streets. Like Singapore, Mumbai could just require people to buy paper day licenses to drive downtown, and require them to show those licenses in their windows. Politics, however, and not technology, would make this strategy difficult.

Mumbai's traffic problems reflect not just poor transportation policy, but a deeper and more fundamental failure of urban planning. In 1991, Mumbai fixed a maximum floor-to-area ratio of 1.33 in most of the city, meaning that it restricted the height of the average building to 1.33 stories: if you have an acre of land, you can construct a two-story building on two-thirds of an acre, or a three-story building on four-ninths of an acre, provided you leave the rest of the property empty. In those years, India still had



a lingering enthusiasm for regulation, and limiting building heights seemed to offer a way to limit urban growth.

But Mumbai's height restrictions meant that, in one of the most densely populated places on Earth, buildings could have an average height of only one and a third stories. People still came; Mumbai's economic energy drew them in, even when living conditions were awful. Limiting heights didn't stop urban growth, it just ensured that more and more migrants would squeeze into squalid, illegal slums rather than occupying legal apartment buildings.

Singapore doesn't prevent the construction of tall buildings, and its downtown functions well because it's tall and connected. Businesspeople work close to one another and can easily trot to a meeting. Hong Kong is even more vertical and even friendlier to pedestrians, who can walk in air-conditioned skywalks from skyscraper to skyscraper. It takes only a few minutes to get around Wall Street or Midtown Manhattan. Even vast Tokyo can be traversed largely on foot. These great cities function because their height enables a huge number of people to work, and sometimes live, on a tiny sliver of land. But Mumbai is short, so everyone sits in traffic and pays dearly for space.

A city of 20 million people occupying a tiny landmass could be housed in corridors of skyscrapers. An abundance of close and connected vertical real estate would decrease the pressure on roads, ease the connections that are the lifeblood of a 21st-century city, and reduce Mumbai's extraordinarily high cost of space. Yet instead of encouraging compact development, Mumbai is pushing people out. Only six buildings in Mumbai rise above 490 feet, and three of them were built last year, with more on the way as some of the height restrictions have been slightly eased, especially outside the traditional downtown. But the continuing power of these requirements explains why many of the new skyscrapers are

surrounded by substantial green space. This traps tall buildings in splendid isolation, so that cars, rather than feet, are still needed to get around. If Mumbai wants to promote affordability and ease congestion, it should make developers use their land area to the fullest, requiring any new downtown building to have at least 40 stories. By requiring developers to create more, not less, floor space, the government would encourage more housing, less sprawl, and lower prices.

Historically, Mumbai's residents couldn't afford such height, but many can today, and they would live in taller buildings if those buildings were abundant and affordable. Concrete canyons, such as those along New York's Fifth Avenue, aren't an urban problem – they are a perfectly reasonable way to fit a large number of people and businesses on a small amount of land. Only bad policy prevents a long row of 50-story buildings from lining Mumbai's seafront, much as high-rises adorn Chicago's lakefront.

The magic of cities comes from their people, but those people must be well served by the bricks and mortar that surround them. Cities need roads and buildings that enable people to live well and to connect easily with one another. Tall towers, like Henry Ford II's Renaissance Center in Detroit, make little sense in places with abundant space and slack demand. But in the most desirable cities, whether they're on the Hudson River or the Arabian Sea, height is the best way to keep prices affordable and living standards high.

The success of our cities, the world's economic engines, increasingly depends on abstruse decisions made by zoning boards and preservation committees. It certainly makes sense to control construction in dense urban spaces, but I would replace the maze of regulations now limiting new construction.

Great cities are not static – they constantly change, and they take the world along with them. When New York and Chicago and Paris experienced great spurts of creativity and growth, they

reshaped themselves to provide new structures that could house new talent and new ideas. Cities can't force change with new buildings – as the Rust Belt's experience clearly shows. But if change is already happening, new building can speed the process along.

Yet many of the world's old and new cities have increasingly arrayed rules that prevent construction that would accommodate higher densities. Sometimes these rules have a good justification, such as preserving truly important works of architecture. Sometimes, they are mindless or a misguided attempt at stopping urban growth. In all cases, restricting construction ties cities to their past and limits the possibilities for their future. If cities can't build up, then they will build out. If building in a city is frozen, then growth will happen somewhere else.

Land-use regulations may seem like urban arcana. But these rules matter because they shape our structures, and our structures shape our societies – often in unexpected ways. Consider that carbon emissions are significantly lower in big cities than in outlying suburbs, and that, as of 2007, life expectancy in New York City was 1.5 years higher than in the nation as a whole. As America struggles to regain its economic footing, we would do well to remember that dense cities are also far more productive than suburbs, and offer better-paying jobs. Globalization and new technologies seem to have only made urban proximity more valuable – young workers gain many of the skills they need in a competitive global marketplace by watching the people around them. Those tall buildings enable the human interactions that are at the heart of economic innovation, and of progress itself. ♦

## A Mother's Death

by *Meghan O'Rourke*

**M**Y MOTHER DIED on Christmas Day, at home, around three in the afternoon. In the first months afterward, I felt an intense desire to write down the story of her death, to tell it over and over to friends. I jotted down stray thoughts and memories in the middle of the night. Even during her last weeks, I found myself squirrelling away her words, all her distinctive expressions: “I love you to death” and “Is that our wind I hear?”

If I told the story of her death, I might understand it better, make sense of it – perhaps even change it. What had happened still seemed implausible. A person was present your entire life, and then one day she disappeared and never came back. It resisted belief. She had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer two and a half years earlier; I had known for months that she was going to die. But her death nonetheless seemed like the wrong outcome – an instant that could have gone differently, a story that could have unfolded otherwise. If I could find the right turning point in the narrative, then maybe, like Orpheus, I could bring the one I sought back from the dead. Aha: Here she is, walking behind me.

It was my mother who had long ago planted in me the habit of writing things down in order to understand them. When I was five, she gave me a red corduroy-covered notebook for Christmas. I sat in my floral nightgown turning the blank pages, puzzled.

“What do I do with it?” I wanted to know.

“You write down things that happened to you that day.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because maybe they’re interesting and you want to remember them.”

“What would I write?”

“Well, you’d write something like ‘Today I saw a woman with purple hair crossing Montague Street.’”

I still remember the way she said that sentence: Today I saw a woman with purple hair crossing Montague Street. It is one of those memories that I carry around, and always will, like the shard of a shell that falls out of a bag you took to the beach for a long summer.

I hadn’t seen a woman with purple hair crossing Montague Street, of course. But in that sentence was my mother’s sense that one might want to capture the extraordinary, her grasp of children’s love of the absurd, her striking physical presence – in my memory, she was leaning toward me, backlit, her black hair falling forward – and her intuition that my seriousness needed to be leavened with playfulness.

My brothers and I spent an inordinate amount of time with our mother when we were children, not only because we went to school where she worked, as the head of the middle school, but because she loved being with kids. She was a bit of a child herself. She had married when she was seventeen, and in some ways never lost the teen-ager inside her. Over the summer, she would study the names of Northeastern birds in her Audubon books and, with utter focus, write a list of the ones she’d seen. She had a vivid sense of what makes children feel safe, and she believed in a child’s experience of the world. Students trusted her, even when they’d been sent to her office and she was asking them why in the world they had done whatever it was they had done.

She spent hours with my brothers and me, making gingerbread houses or sledding or cutting out paper snowflakes. She taught us all to make apple pie, and read “The Black Stallion” out loud to us at night – though she also had a habit of promising to read a book out loud and then giving up partway through. The boxes of memorabilia she kept for each of us were always disorganized. One of the things I found there after she died was a card I had made for her birthday when I was about six. It began:

TO MOM

I LOVE YOU.

I LOVE THE STORIES

YOU MAKE WITH ME.

On a hazy October morning, after months of chemotherapy, my mother and I drove down to New York-Presbyterian Hospital in the near-dark, listening to traffic reports like all the other commuters. The cancer had spread to her lungs and her liver. This wasn’t likely to be a story that ended well. But, in a last-ditch effort, we had enrolled her in an experimental treatment program. I thought, darkly, that the creeping cars around us were like souls wandering in Hades. My mother was quiet. I worried that she resented my fussing about what she was eating and whether my father had given her the right pain medication.

I had often picked my mother up after her chemo treatments, but I had never seen one in progress. It is a brisk business. Needles and bags are efficiently hustled into place, as if it were not poison that is about to be put in the body. The nurses were funny and frank, though they’d just met my mother. As the drugs slid up the IV into her arm, we watched stolid barges plug up the Hudson like islands, the water silver in the haze. I read poems, and she asked me about poetry.

“I don’t really understand it,” she said. “I never have. Do you think you could teach me to read a poem?”

I said that I could.

As she grew even sicker, her clothes began to hang off her; her stomach sometimes showed because her pants were too big. One day when I came downstairs, she was in the kitchen, putting cups away in odd places with one hand and, with the other, holding a tape measure around her waist, as if it were a belt.

Every morning the hospice nurse came for two hours. Each visit started the same way: On a scale of one to ten, Barbara, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, how bad is your pain? The nurses said it fast and singsong, like a prayer or a sales pitch. My mother took to holding up her fingers, not bothering to speak: seven fingers. Every time she went to the bathroom with her walker, it made a scratching sound against the kitchen’s stone floor. Scritch-scratch. Scritch-scratch. Her eyes had begun to go vacant. Her hair was a mess. Soon we needed a toilet adjuster, because we couldn’t lift her off the seat. Then she could no longer stand. The hospice nurse washed her with a warm cloth. Before long, she was asleep most of the time. Then we needed the diapers.

Her hospital bed was in the living room. We took turns sleeping on the couch beside it at night. I wrapped myself in blankets on the couch and read through the quiet hours of the morning, just as I used to in the summers we spent in Vermont, in a tiny mountainside cabin. Sometimes we would go canoe camping for a week or two on Moosehead Lake, in Maine, driving up from Brooklyn or from our cabin in a station wagon packed to the brim with boxes and bags and two canoes precariously strapped to the top of the car. My brother Liam and I were each allowed to bring a wooden wine box of books. “One crate,” my

mother said firmly. I would line my crate with paperbacks, rearranging them to fit everything in. Once, after the long drive without air-conditioning – our cars, the castoffs of friends, never had such niceties – my puppy jumped out of an open window when my parents stopped to get our camping license. “Finn!” I cried in fright, thinking he’d finally had enough of us. But all he did was shoot down the hill to the dock and then leap straight out into the blue water. He had never seen a lake before.

The lake was huge, stretching lakily out to the horizon, and it changed you to see it, after the hours of asphalt and the car climbing huge hills and descending them, climbing again and descending, hemmed in by hundred-year-old oaks and maples. At our campsite, I would open the tent, insert the flexible metal wires that held it up, and hammer in the supporting pegs with a rock or a book, my brother doing the same, his blond head bent over a peg. He was young and slower than I was, and I’d shove him aside in the end to do it myself. Then we got inside and read.

I read “The Scarlet Pimpernel” by flashlight one night when I was ten. It seemed exciting and dastardly and terrifying; the ground was rotting under me as I read. How could these people want to murder lords and ladies? Lords and ladies were the heroines of my storybooks. Usually, the true-of-heart turned out to be a hidden princess. I didn’t understand. I especially didn’t understand how “The Scarlet Pimpernel” could take for granted these casual dealings in blood and terror. Whatever that reality, it had nothing to do with the lake or my dog or me – except I knew that on some level it did. And I knew, too, that I needed to understand. I remember the blanketing fear, my confusion, the night pressing against the tent, and the mahogany light cast by the flashlight against the yellowing book.

Now all those books have yellowed; they sit on the rec-room bookshelves in my dad's house, some moth-eaten and mildewed, others brittle, the corners of the pages breaking as you turn them.

The summer I was eight, I became preoccupied with the thought that I was going to die. My mother noticed that something was wrong, and would pull me onto her lap and ask me if I was O.K., but I had no words to explain my fear; it seemed too enormous to talk about, or even to write down in my journal. One morning, curled up in my sleeping bag on the couch at our cabin, reading an Agatha Christie mystery, I listened as Liam, playing go fish with my mother, turned to her and said, "I don't want to die. Do you not want to die? What happens to us when we die?"

And my mother put the cards down and said, slowly, "No, I don't want to die. But I don't know what happens to us when we die."

"It's scary," he said.

"Yes, it is," our mother said calmly. "But it's not going to happen to you for a long time."

I was both nauseated and riveted: these were the words I had wanted to say, and couldn't. Perhaps that was because I knew already that any comfort she could offer would be false.

A week before my mother died, my father brought home a Christmas tree and decorated it with lights. It was five feet from my mother's bed, and the warm glow of the colored lights made her look tan.

In the rec room, I found an old copy of "The Hound of the Baskervilles," which she'd given me for Christmas when I was in the fourth grade. I read it as I lay next to her, remembering those days when I would get up before she did, make a bowl of cereal, and zip myself into a sleeping bag. She would eventually wake and

come out to the kitchen in her nightshirt and call out, "Hi, Meg." Trying to let her go, I found that I was only hungry for more of her. A mother is a story with no beginning. That is what defines her.

One night, I woke in the dark and saw that my father had come downstairs and was looking at her, fists punched into his sweatshirt pocket, shoulders hunched. He stood for minutes, gazing down on her sleeping face.

In those last few days, she began to look very young. Her face had lost so much weight that the bones showed through, like a child's. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were very black. I held her hand. I smoothed her face. Her skin had begun to feel waxy, but was also covered with little grains, as if she were in the process of exfoliating.

When she died that Christmas, we were all beside her. Her breath slowed and then she opened her eyes to look at us and we told her the things we had to say, and then she slipped away.

We had no rules about what to do right after my mother died; in fact, we were clueless –

"What do we do now?"

"Call the nurse."

"The nurse says to stay here."

– and so we sat with her body, holding her hands. I kept touching the skin on her face, which was rubbery but still hers, feeling morbid as I did it, but feeling, too, that it was strange that I should think so. This was my mother. In the old days, the days I read about in fantasy tales as a child, didn't the bereaved wash the body as they said their goodbyes? I was ransacking the moment for understanding. Finally, when the funeral-home workers came to take her away, I went to my room and called some friends, saying, "My mother has died." I had the floating sensation that I

was acting out a part in a movie, trying on the words, trying on the story.

The previous May, around the time my mother was coming to see that the cancer was the thing that would kill her, I picked her up from chemo and she asked me to take her to the Cloisters before going home. I had a hard time looking at her, because her skin was gray. We walked through the dark gallery below the colonnaded garden and studied the art. “This has been in the world for so long,” she said, pointing to one image. As we emerged into the sunlight, she bent stiffly to read the names of the planted herbs and flowers just coming up – lily of the valley, myrtle, columbine. “Here comes the spring,” she said thoughtfully, as if she knew that she would never see it again.

She told me that she wanted to die in our living room, where she could look at old things. A great blue heron had begun coming to our lawn and perching on a rock by the small pond at its foot, and she liked to keep an eye out for it. In her last weeks, I would sit next to her, rubbing her feet, watching her gaze out the window – she looked past us, like an X-ray machine. Already left behind, I wanted to call out, like Orpheus, “Come back! Come back!”

Yet the story of Orpheus, it occurs to me, is not just about the desire of the living to resuscitate the dead but about the ways in which the dead drag us along into their shadowy realm because we cannot let them go. So we follow them into the Underworld, descending, descending, until one day we turn and make our way back.

Now and then, you think you discern glimpses of that other life. Running along a quiet road four months after her death, I thought I felt my mother near me, just to the side. I turned, and

saw nothing except a brown bird with a gray ruff and strangely tufted feathers. I did not know its name. She would have.

The poem I would have taught her how to read was Robert Frost’s “The Silken Tent,” one long sentence strewn across fourteen lines, like an exhale, or a breeze. It compares a woman to a tent swaying in the wind, a tent that “is loosely bound / By countless silken ties of love and thought / To every thing on earth the compass round.”

I thought of that poem one wintry night nearly a year after her death. Walking through the West Village, I saw on a sidewalk bookseller’s table a cheap paperback copy of a novel my mom had given me when I was a teen-ager – a novel that, she told me, had meant a lot to her. I bought it and read it that night, feeling that I was learning something new about both myself and her, since she had loved that novel, with its story of a young Irish-Catholic woman struggling to understand herself. I would always look for clues to her in books and poems, I realized. I would always search for the echoes of the lost person, the scraps of words and breath, the silken ties that say, Look: she existed. ♦

## *Side by...*

### Fleeting

by *Adam Smyth*

ON RECENT SUNDAY MORNINGS, I walked much of the route that the Fleet River – now a subterranean waterway once followed. The Fleet was a major waterway in Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain, with wells and springs dotting its banks: Skinner’s Well; Fogg’s Well; Tod’s Well; Rad Well; and Clerks’ Well of course, or Clerkenwell, frequented, according to the sixteenth century antiquarian John Stow, ‘by scholars and youths of the city in summer evenings, when they walk forth to take the air.’ By the time Stow compiled his meticulous but elegiac Survey of London (1598), the river was in a terrible way, a dumping ground for all kinds of waste and a source of shame at a moment when London was learning how to celebrate itself to the world. Ben Jonson’s ‘On the Famous Voyage’, written a decade or so later, imagines two half-drunk city boys journeying up the polluted Fleet Ditch from Bridewell to Holborn, perhaps in search of a brothel. In terms of critical standing, Jonson’s ‘Voyage’ is now almost as subterranean as the present-day river. The literary scholar Richard Helgerson called Jonson’s poem one of ‘the filthiest, the most deliberately and insistently disgusting poems in the language’ – an assessment which would, one suspects, have warmed Jonson’s heart. It certainly is insistently scatological: How dare / Your daintie nostrills ... / Tempt such a passage? when each privies

## *...by side*

### A londoni Fleet

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

NÉHA VASÁRNAP DÉLELŐTT végigjárom a mára földalatti bűvópatakká szelídült Fleet folyó egykori útvonalát. A római és az angolszász időkben a Fleet fontos víziút volt, kutak és források szegélyezték az útját: Skinner-kút, Fogg-kút, Tod-kút, Rad-kút és természetesen a diákok kútja, a Clerkenwell, amelyet a 16. században élt könyvkereskedő, John Stow szerint „tudósok és fiatalok gyakran kerestek fel nyári esteken, miután otthagyták a könyvtárakat, hogy levegőzzenek a városban.” Jóllehet azokban az években, amikor Stow aprólékos gonddal összeállította elégiikus beszámolóját (*Survey of London*, 1598), a folyó már szörnyű állapotba került. Mindenféle szemét és szenny lerakóhelyévé, London szégyenfoltjává vált éppen abban a pillanatban, amikor a város ünnepelni kezdte magát a világ szemében. Ben Jonson verse, a Híres utazás, nagyjából egy évtizeddel később született. A szerző képzeletében két félrészeg fiatal járja be a Fleetcsatorna útvonalát Bridewelltől Holbornig, valószínűsíthetően bordélyházat keresve. Kritikai szempontból Jonson Utazása majdnem olyan földalatti, mint a mai folyó. Az irodalomtudós, Richard Helgerson Jonson írását „az egyik legszennesebb és szándékában a legundorítóbb angol nyelvű versként” tartja számon, amely megítélés minden bizonnyal megdobogtatta volna Jonson szívét. A költő stílusa kétségkívül trágár:

seate / Is fill'd with buttock? And the walls doe sweate / Urine.'

Algernon Swinburne thought this all inherently un-English: 'how far poetry may be permitted to go in the line of sensual pleasure or sexual emotion may be debatable between the disciples of Ariosto and the disciples of Milton,' he declared, 'but all English readers, I trust, will agree with me that coprology should be left to the Frenchman.' Jonson's poem – 'the plunge of a Parisian diver into the cesspool', in Swinburne's words – is only partly a response to the actual Fleet, It is also a tussle with traditions of river writing which Jonson wanted both to acknowledge and surpass – his own literary ambitions flowing faster than the Tiber. Jonson was rewriting classical representations of rivers in the Iliad and the Odyssey: 'All, that they boast of Styx, of Acheron,' writes Jonson, 'Cocytus, Phlegethon, our [Fleet] have prov'd in one'. And he was also responding, more locally, to a largely decorous tradition of Renaissance river poetry. In 'Poly-Olbion' (1612), a (rarely read) 15,000-line verse surveying the 'Delicacies, Chorographicall Description, and Historic' of England and Wales, Michael Drayton lent voices to rivers to tell stories of the past; and in Edmund Spenser's 'Prothalamion' (1596), the narrator, stung by failed hopes of artistic patronage, 'Walk'd forth to ease my pain / Along the shore of silver-streaming Thames'. The river catalyses Spenser's poem, providing both a place and a time for writing: 'Sweet Thames run softly,' his refrain returns, till I end my song'. But if river poetry celebrated circulation – and a sense of a regulated, breathing, balanced London – Jonson's Fleet was stagnant, stuck, clogged with the 'haire of meazled hogs, / The heads, houghs, entrailles, and the hides of dogs.'

Today, one can see the origins of the Fleet in Hampstead's early eighteenth century ponds, created by damming the Fleet's two headwaters at the Vale of Health and Kenwood. The ponds

„Hogy merészelsz  
Finnás orral ...  
Beleszokolni az útba,  
Mikor minden tanácsosi széket  
Egy segg rogyaszt? És a falak  
Vizeletszagot árasztanak.”

Algernon Swinburne az ilyen kirohanást eredendően angoltalannak véli: „Ariosto és Milton tanítványai vitatkozhatnak azon, hogy meddig mehet el a költészet az érzéki gyönyörök és a szexualitás érzelmeinek leírásában, de minden angol olvasó egyet fog érteni velem abban, hogy hagyjuk a koprológiát a franciákra.” Jonson verse – Swinburne szavaival „egy párizsi bűvár alámerülése az emésztőgödörbe” – csak látszólag beszél a Fleet szennyeződéséről. A vers sokkal inkább alkalmat teremt arra, hogy a költő szembeszegüljön a folyókat ábrázoló írásmódor hagyományával: elismeri és igyekszik meghaladni ezt a hagyományt; Jonson irodalmi ambíciói gyorsabban áramlanak, mint a Tevere. A vers felülírja az *Íliász* és az *Odüsszeia* óta divatos folyó-reprezentációkat: „Mindent, mit a Styx és az Acheron dicsőségéről vall Cocytus és Phlegethon, folyónk [a Fleet] magában hordoz.” Másfelől az egészében véve ünnepélyes reneszánsz folyóköltészetéről is ítéletet mond. Michael Drayton *Poly-Olbion* (1612) című, ritkán olvasott, 15 ezer soros versében Anglia és Wales „Tüneményeit, Chorografikus Ábrázolását és Történetét” nyújtja, a megszemélyesített folyók szájába adva a múlt történeteit. Edmund Spenser *Prothalamion* című munkájában pedig a beszélő, a művészi támogatásba vetett reményekből kiábrándultan

„Végigsétált, hogy fájdalmát enyhítse  
Az ezüst-sodró Temze partján.”

A folyó katalizátorként kínálja a vershelyszínt és a pillanatot: „Az édes Temze puhán szalad – ismétli a refrén –, míg dalomat bevégzem.” Ám míg az elfogadott folyóábrázolás a körforgást, a



were originally constructed to supply drinking water to downstream St. Pancras, but now are sites for bathing and model boating. From here the Fleet's two streams travel underground, through Dartmouth Park, and under Kentish Town. Considerable nineteenth century ink was spilt over Kentish Town's possible etymology from 'Ken Ditch Town', that is a village on the Kenwood river'. The two branches join under Quinns: a bright yellow and blue Camden pub, itself, on a good night, no friend of daintie nostrills'. From Camden, the Fleet heads towards Kings Cross: it flows beneath Regent's Canal to St. Pancras – where, until it was arched over in 1766, it was known as Pancras Wash – and then to the aforementioned Clerkenwell.

In the past the river here was more than twenty metres wide as other small tributaries joined up, but its presence now is only implicit. Tucked behind the 'Gwynne Place' bus-stop on Kings Cross Road there is a plaque marking Fleet-derived 'Bagnigge Wells'. Here, if you had been alive and fashionable in eighteenth century London, you might have taken the waters and the tea: 'both the chalybeate and purging waters,' wrote the proprietor, Mr. Davis, in the *Daily Advertisement* for July 1775, 'are in the greatest perfection ever known, and may be drank at 3d. each person, or delivered at the pump-room at 8d. per gallon, where ladies and gentlemen may depend upon having the best tea, coffee, hot loaves, &c.' Opposite the Wells stood Bagnigge House, former summer residence of Nell Gwynne and today the site of a Travelodge (where – the website notes – 'You can make a decent cup of tea by sticking the tea-bag in the mug, so why incur the cost of a teapot?') The Fleet then runs on to Farringdon Road, cutting its way beneath organic food halls and gastropubs and exhausted newsagents and lap dancing clubs, under Farringdon Street and Bridge Street, before eventually reaching the Thames, beneath Blackfriars Bridge.

vérkeringést egy szabályozott, lélegző, kiegyensúlyozott London képében ünnepli, addig Jonson a Fleetet pangó állóvíznek mutatja, amit eltömit

„a sertésvészben elhullott disznók szőre,  
Kutyák feje, belei, csánkja és irhája.”

Ma a Fleet eredetét a kora 18. századbeli Hampstead duzzasztott tavaiban kell keresnünk, a folyó két forrásvidékén, Vale of Health-ben és Kenwoodban. A tavakat eredetileg St. Pancras ivóvízellátására hozták létre, de mára csupán fürdésre és hajómodellezésre alkalmasak. Innen a Fleet két ága a föld alatt folytatja útját, Dartmouth Parkon és Kentish Townon keresztül. A 19. században jelentős mennyiségű tintát szenteltek az utóbbi városrész nevének etimológiai magyarázatának, miszerint az elnevezés a 'Kent Ditch Town' (azaz, a Kenwood folyó mentén fekvő falu) kifejezésből ered. A folyó két ága az élénk sárga és kék színre festett, camdeni kocsmá, a Quinn alatt egyesül, amely jobb estéken manapság sem barátja „a finnyás orrnak”. Camdentől a Fleet King's Cross felé folyik, St. Pancrasba tartva áthalad a Regent-csatorna alatt, ahol 1776-ig – amikor boltívet építettek fölé – egyszerűen csak Pancras szennyes üledékeként kezelték, majd ezt követően a fent említett diákok kútja, a Clerkenwell irányába folytatódik.

A múltban a folyó ezen a szakaszon, a mellékágak becsatlakozásának köszönhetően, több mint húsz méter szélesen hömpölygött, míg mára jelenléte alig észrevehető. A King's Cross Roadon, a Gwynne Place buszmegálló mögött rejtőzik egy apró tábla, mely hirdeti, hogy a Bagnigge-kút vizét a Fleetből nyeri. Ezen a helyen, ha már megszülettünk volna és járatosak lennénk a 18. századi London mindennapjaiban, vehetnénk vizet és teát egyaránt. „Mind a vastartalmú ásványvíz, mind a hashajtó hatású tisztítóvíz tökéletes minőségben lelhető itt – írja Mr. Davis 1775 júliusában a *Daily Advertisement* hasábjain. – Ára 3

The Fleet is a subterranean river but it's still possible to hear its journey. There is a grate in the road outside the Coach and Horses pub on Ray Street, Farringdon, and anyone willing to lie in the road with an ear to the ground can catch the remarkably loud sound of the Fleet's rushing water: 'when the noise doth beat', wrote Jonson (presumably not lying in the road), 'Upon your eares, of discords so un-sweet.' The other chance for Fleet-glimpsing is at the river's exit, beneath Blackfriars Bridge. The spot is unmarked, but if you arrive at low-tide, walk to the right and lean out as far as possible, you can just about see the hole where the Fleet hits the Thames. It's hidden away – everyone walks by – but you can catch sight of the waters that started off in Hampstead tumbling out into the Thames.

Attempts to cleanse and restore the Fleet have been fitful and ineffective. The most sustained came in 1502, during the reign of Henry VII, and was sufficient (according to Stow) 'so that boats with fish and fuel were rowed to Fleete bridge which was a great commodity to all the inhabitants.' An Elizabethan effort in 1589 raised money but – as with Mayor Ken's Millennial Thames fireworks – (so Stow tells us) 'the effect failed.' Christopher Wren's 1680s plans for the Fleet-as-Venetian-canal didn't endure; and by the 1730s, the river's principal function was to serve as a muddy grave for drunken Londoners, unsteady on their way home. And so it was covered, with a new Fleet Market built on top in 1737 – although sections remained defiantly open for another thirty years, and continued to receive lurching revellers. Samuel Scott's circa 1750 painting, Entrance to the Fleet River, depicts an oddly idyllic, largely Venetian scene and suggests an enthusiasm for Canaletto rather than an interest in London's actual waters. Scott's scene certainly sits uneasily with Jonathan Swift's description, from 1710, of 'Seepings from Butchers' stalls, dung, guts and blood; / Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all

penny személyenként vagy megvásárolható a kútnál, gallonja 8 pennyért, ahol a hölgyek és urak a legjobb teára, kávéra, péksüteményre &c számíthatnak." A kúttal átellenben áll a Bagniggeház, a korábbiakban Neil Gwynne nyári rezidenciája, ma vendéglátóhely. A honlap tanúsága szerint „egész rendes csésze teát kaphatunk, ha a filtert a csészébe lógtatjuk. Miért fizetnénk külön a teáskannáért?” A Fleet innen a Farringdon Road felé tart, biopiacok és ingyenc vendéglők, fáradt újságosok és táncos klubok mögött. A Farringdon Street és a Bridge Street után éri el a Temzét a Blackfriars-hídnál.

A Fleet földalatti folyó ma már, de útja még ma is füllel követhető. Ha valaki hajlandó az úttestre hasalva fülét a lefolyórácsra illeszteni a Ray Street-i Coach and Horses kocsmá mellett Farringdonban, még ma is elkaphatja a Fleet tovafutó vizének határozott robaját, „amikor a folyó hangja – állapítja meg Jonson, valószínűleg tartózkodva attól, hogy az útra feküdjön – oly édesítetlen diszharmóniát zeng a fülünkbe.” A Blackfriars-híd mögött is megpillanthatjuk a Fleet vizét. Ha apálykor érkezünk a jelöletlen helyszínre, és kihajolunk a jobb oldalon, amennyire csak lehetséges, éppen láthatóvá válik az áramlat, ahol a Fleet a Temzébe ömlik. A folyó rejtőzködő – mindenki tovább sétál –, de ha odafigyelünk, megkülönböztethetjük a Hampsteadből induló folyó vizét a Temze vizétől.

A Fleet vizének megtisztítására tett kísérletek ritkán valósultak meg. Mégis a leghatékonyabb próbálkozás VII. Henrik uralkodása idején, 1502-ben történt, amely – Stow szerint – „lehetővé tette, hogy a lakosság számára fontos hallal és fűtőanyaggal megrakott csónokok elérjék a Fleet hídját.” Az Erzsébet-korban, 1589-ben sikerült pénzt gyűjteni, de – csakúgy, ahogy Ken főpolgármester ezredfordulós tűzijátéka – Stow szavaival „a kívánt hatás elmaradt”. Christopher Wren 1680-as tervei a folyó Velence csatornarendszeréhez hasonló kiépítésére

dressed in mud, / Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.’ in the 1860s, the Fleet was integrated into London’s new sewer network, designed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette in response to what historians fondly call ‘The Great Stink’ of 1858.

But encounters with the Fleet have perhaps always been nostalgic: as far back as the thirteenth century it was a fallen river that caused Londoners to wonder at a pure past now lost. In 1290, the prior of a Carmelite house in Whitefriars complained of the incense-defeating stench; and a century later, Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, lamented that the Fleet, once ‘of such breadth and depth’ (Stow reports) to welcome ‘ten or twelve ships’, was now ‘by filth of tanners and such others, sore decayed.’ Stow imagines ‘sweet and fresh waters’ circulating through pre-Conquest London – ‘they had in every street and lane of the city divers fair wells and fresh springs’ – but the river of Stow’s sixteenth century, ‘in process of time’, was ‘utterly decayed.’ Londoners pick through the mud of the Fleet for the detritus of the past: nineteenth century grubbers and toshers and mudlarks – often young children – scavenged for anything valuable; and their learned equivalents in the British Archaeological Association turned up arrowheads, coins, padlocks, keys, daggers, seals with Saxon names, crucifixes, a ship’s anchor near the end of Baker Street and a delicate bone knife carved with a female bust that perhaps resembled Catherine de Medici.

The paradox of rivers is always their simultaneous permanence and transience: they provide natural boundaries that carve up landscape, organising and defining cities; yet they are also always passing by. The Fleet resonates for Londoners, now, in the place names that recall its presence: Brookfield Park in Camden; Anglers Lane in Kentish Town; Well Walk and Fleet Primary School in Hampstead. The river almost returned to life as a source of transport and circulation when, in the 1970s, London

csupán rövid ideig arattak elismerést, s 1730 táján a Fleet már mint mocsaras sírhely szolgált London lerészegedett, hazafelé támolygó lakosai számára. Ezért aztán befedték, és az új Fleet piacot építették fel fölötte 1737-ben, jöllehet bizonyos szakaszok még harminc évig nyitva maradtak és továbbra is magukba fogadták a tántorgó mulatozót. Samuel Scott 1750 körüli festménye, *A Fleet folyó bejárata*, furcsán idillikus, Velence-szerű jelenetet ábrázol, amely szenvedélyesebb érdeklődést sejtet Canaletto iránt, mint London tényleges folyóvize iránt. Scott képe egyáltalán nem egyeztethető össze Jonathan Swift 1710-ben keletkezett leírásával:

„Mészárszékek hordaléka, belek, vér és trágya,  
Vízbefojtott kutyakölykök, büdös sprotni sárban,  
Döglött macskák, répalevél buknak le az árral.”

Az 1860-as években a Fleet részévé vált a Joseph Bazalgette tervezte új londoni csatornázási rendszernek, melyet a történészek szeretnek az ’1858-as Nagy Búz’ kiváltotta válaszlépésként értelmezni.

A folyóhoz fűződő kapcsolatunk mindazonáltal mindig nosztalgikus jelleget öltött. Már a 13. században is úgy tekintettek a Fleetre, mint a bukott folyóra, amely a londoniakat egy tisztább, de elveszett múltra emlékezteti. 1290-ben a whitefriarsi karmelita kolostor perjele arról panaszkodik, hogy a folyó bűze mellett a tömjén illata nem érezhető. Egy évszázaddal később Lincoln grófja, Henry de Lacy pedig azon sajnálkozik, hogy az egykor – Stow szavaival – „szélesen hömpölygő, tíz-tizenkét hajót is befogadó folyó”, mára „a cserző- és egyéb műhelyek szennye miatt fájdalmasan kimúlt.” Stow a normann hódítást megelőző időkbe „friss édesvízzel áradó” folyót képzel bele, amikor „a város minden utcájában hús kutakra és friss forrásokra leltek”, de a folyó Stow korára, a 16. századra „az idők munkája révén elvesztett minden életet.” A múlt törmelékéért ma-

Underground planned a 'Fleet Line', which would have traced part of the river. But this went the way of those Elizabethan restorations: the route was revised and the Fleet Line became, in 1977, the Jubilee. But anyone, now, seeking a sense of 'the filth, stench, noise' of 'this dire passage' need only turn to Ben Jonson's poem. ♦



napság a londoniaknak a Fleet iszapos felszínén kell keresztülhatolniuk. A 19. században guberálók és szamárcsapatok – gyakran egészen fiatalok – értékek után kotorásztak a sárban. Tanultabb társaik, a Brit Régészeti Társaság tagjai, nyílhegyeket, érméket, lakatokat, kulcsokat, szász nevekkal ellátott családi pecsétet, keresztet találtak, sőt egy hajó vasmacskáját a Baker Street végétől nem messze, valamint egy finoman megmunkált csontkést, amelynek női mellszobrot ábrázoló alakja vélhetően Medici Katalint mintázza.

A folyók paradoxona minden esetben állandó és átmeneti jellegük együttes jelenléte. Természetes határokat képeznek, amelyek a tájat felsebzik, meghatározzák és szervezik a városok fejlődését, de ugyanakkor állandóan távoznak. A londoniak számára a Fleet jelenléte ma olyan nevekben tükröződik, mint a Brookfield Park Camdenben, az Anglers Lane Kentish Townban, a Well Walk és a Fleet Általános Iskola Hampsteadben. A folyó 1970-ben majdnem új életre kelt mint a londoni metrórendszer új ága – a Fleet Line –, amelynek egyes szakaszai a folyómeder vonalát követték volna, de a városi közlekedési terv ugyanolyan sorsra jutott, mint a hajdani Erzsébet-kori tervek: a megghiúsult Fleet Line helyett 1977-ben a Jubilee Line épült meg. Ha azonban valaki még ma is a „szenny, bűz és zaj” vonásait keresné „ebben az irtóztatós víziútban”, nyugodtan lapozza fel Ben Jonson versét. ♦