

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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Carnival done Italian-style

FRANCESCA CAVALLO

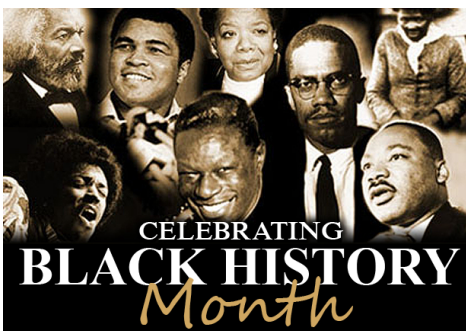
February in Italy is infiltrated by masks, confetti, colors, and lights that create a very exciting and unique atmosphere. Carnival is a huge winter festival celebrated 40 days before Easter and ends on Shrove Tuesday (Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras), the day before Ash Wednesday. It is not a single day or event, but a whole season of masquerades and fun for people of all ages, especially children who really love it. When I was a child, I looked forward to it all year long because every Sunday you could run through the town square wearing costumes that represented cartoon characters or superheroes while tossing confetti to create a rainbow shower for passersby. Pranks are also common during Carnival, hence the saying: “A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale”, “anything goes at Carnival”. During this time, you could even prank your classmates and not be punished for it. It was fantastic!

Carnival has its roots in pagan festivals, and traditions are usually adapted to fit in with Catholic rituals. Historically, it was the last chance for Catholics to indulge before they gave up meat (traditionally) for Lent, though today people give up all sorts of other things for Lent. The name for the festival in Italian is “Carnevale” the word “carne” means meat in

Italian. It was perhaps not only a last chance to indulge, but also an opportunity to consume any meat that had been put up for winter that might not stay fresh enough for consumption until spring.

The tradition of getting dressed up at Carnival is one that dates back to a time when the class system played a major role in society. It is celebrated in many different ways, varying from region to region, and city to city. Venice, Viareggio, Putignano, and Ivrea are towns that hold the biggest and most elaborate Carnival festivals in Italy. Carnival in Venice is very refined, elegant, and chic. Masks (*maschere*) are an important part of the Carnival festival and Venice is the best city for traditional masks. Its traditions began as a time for celebration and expression throughout the classes because wearing masks hid any form of identity between social classes. Today, approximately three million visitors come to Venice for the celebrations. Two of the classic Venetian costumes are the *Bauta* and the *Moretta*. *Bauta* is composed of a black cloak (*tabarro*), a black tricorn (*tricorno*), and a white mask called *larva*. It tends to be the main type of mask

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worn during Carnival. It was also used on many other occasions as a device for hiding the wearer's identity and social status. It was thus useful for a variety of purposes: some of them illicit or criminal, others personal, such as for romantic encounters. The *Moretta* is an oval mask of black velvet that was usually worn by women visiting convents. It was invented in France and rapidly became popular in Venice as it brought out the beauty of feminine features. The mask was accentuated with a veil, and secured in place by a small part in the wearer's mouth. Carnival in Venice is a unique and dazzling experience, probably because this city has a particular glamour to it, especially during winter.

Viareggio, on the Tuscany Coast, has one of the biggest Carnival celebrations in Italy. Viareggio's Carnival is known for its giant, allegorical papier-mâché floats used in parades, not only on Shrove Tuesday, but also on the three Sundays before and the Sunday that follows. Festivals, cultural events, concerts, and masked balls take place throughout the Carnival season both in Viareggio and in neighboring regions, and restaurants have specialized Carnival menus. The artistic refinement of the papier-mâché masterpieces are admired as true works of art, similar to the luxurious masquerades in Venice.

However, the oldest carnival celebrations in Europe are found at the Putignano Carnival in Puglia. Dating back to 1394, it was only during the Fascist era that this rural carnival developed into the more refined, suburban event of today. This was when the parade of floats, a favorite form of communication in Fascist culture, came into fashion. The first floats are said to have been made with straw and rags, then cardboard and wood, until the current technique of papier-mâché over wire structures was developed. The floats always have themes related to scathing political satire or current affairs, and feature giant caricatures of politicians or TV personalities. They are accompanied by troupes of costumed dancers and loud music to engage the crowds of spectators.

The city of Ivrea, in the Piedmont region, has a very peculiar Carnival celebration called the "Historical Carnival of Ivrea," which includes the characteristic "Battle of Oranges." The spirit of the carnival lives through the reenactment of the city's liberation from tyranny dating back to medieval times. A baron who starved the city was driven away thanks to a miller's daughter who roused the people to revolt. Today, the Battle of Oranges takes place in

the main squares of the city between teams on carts wearing protective masks (symbolizing the tyrant's guards with armor), and hundreds of orange-throwers on foot without any protection (the rebellious commoners). Together with all the historical events occurring during Carnival at Ivrea, the Battle of Oranges constitutes an incredible cultural and goliardic heritage, and it's an event in which anyone can participate. In order to show their involvement, beginning on the Thursday before Lent, all townspeople and visitors wear the "*Berretto Frigio*" (Phrygian cap), a red stocking-like hat that shows their support for revolt and therefore their aspirations for freedom, as it was for the heroes of the French Revolution. The red hat is also a signal for the orange-throwers that you are a spectator and they will not throw fruit directly at you. If you want to witness this exciting event, take note of the routes that are meant specifically for visitors and spectators: they are usually marked by nets draped around buildings, which can shield you from the flying fruit.

One of the best parts of Carnival is the special food that is only available during that time of the year. Today, many carnival traditions have vanished or changed, but fried pastries are still common in Fat Tuesday cooking. The gastronomy is very rich in fats and sweets. Spoonfuls of dough fried in oil take the shape of small balls, the so-called *frittelle* or *castagnole*. The main ingredients are eggs, sugar, flour, and butter. They are served with icing sugar; some Italians like to fill them with chocolate or custard cream. *Chiacchiere* (meaning chatter, gossip) are also common all over Italy and they assume many different names: *frappe* in Rome, *sfrappe* in the region of Marche, *flappe* in central Italy, *cenci* in Tuscany, *bugie* in Piemonte, *sfrappole* or *nastri delle suore* in Emilia, and *gigi* in Sicily. Despite the differences between names, the ingredients and method of cooking are always the same: flour, butter, sugar, and vegetable oil for frying. They essentially look like little, puffy biscuits, but have the light, crumbly texture of puff pastry. They are honey-colored and served with a sprinkling of icing sugar on top.

As you can see, Carnival in Italy is all about fun! It is a time when the pressures of everyday life are forgotten in a joyous rush of celebration, where the rules that shape the rest of the year do not necessarily apply. It's the last hurrah before the more serious and less frivolous Lenten period. The more wine, sweets, costumes, and parties during this time of celebration, the better! So join in the festivities but, as I said, be careful, because "*A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale*"—at Carnival, anything goes.

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selections.rockefeller.edu

nseditors@rockefeller.edu



A Special Thanks and Farewell

This month, the *Natural Selections* Editorial Board bids farewell to **Peng Kate Gao**. We would like to thank her for her dedication and for helping *Natural Selections* to become what it is today.

Peng has been a contributor and editor for *Natural Selections* for over two years. She acted as the Assistant Managing Editor and was our first Board member to come from outside of Rockefeller, having joined us from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Peng has since gone on to become an Associate Editor for *Nature Communications*.

We wish her all the best!

Culture Corner

Landscape Into Art: Thoughts on the book Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape (by Christopher S. Wood), and the film The Revenant (directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu)

BERNIE LANGS

Caution: spoilers ahead!

The inspired ideas and emotions one experiences when taking in the sights of nature, reading about the subject, or seeing a film with beautiful landscapes, can range wildly, from those of awe and wonder to absolute terror. I've come to believe that once humans banded together to hunt and farm, communicate effectively, and build communal living areas, the species irrevocably lost any direct association with natural surroundings. We were left with only the ability to examine the inner biological mechanics of being for understanding what is called "nature." We were destined from an early time as persistently self-aware beings to be removed and isolated observers of the planet's natural wonders, no matter how in awe we are by such magnificence.

Ideas about the relationship of Man and his natural surroundings are examined in fantastic detail in *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* by Christopher S. Wood, who is Professor and Chair of the Department of German at New York University. Professor Wood's book is an incredible achievement in art historical theory and research. It investigates a single daunting question: What motivated the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Altdorfer (1480 – 1538) to paint the very first stand-alone landscape paintings in human history? How did a European world completely centered on religion, with its arts engulfed in religious or classically-themed pagan iconography, end up with an artist creating pictures either with no humans in them at all or as tiny figures in overwhelmingly dense forest settings?

Professor Wood thoroughly examines the mindset of the artists of the German Renaissance era in which Altdorfer worked, a much less studied locality than that of the Italian and Flemish schools. He also examines the implications on his thesis drawn from the scant information in the historical record about the artist's personal life. The book has beautiful reproductions of the works by German masters of paintings, drawings and prints, many in color, lending themselves well to deep meditation on its themes.



Albrecht Altdorfer's most famous painting: The Battle of Alexander and Darius at Issus (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany)
Wikipedia – Public Domain

Altdorfer was caught between the rising tide of Martin Luther's iconoclastic teachings (Luther was alive and active during his time) and traditional Christianity as practiced out of Rome, but he never completely gave in to the former. Professor Wood notes that as the landscape setting encroached on the religious saints and the pagan heroes in paintings, certain aspects of the primeval forests took on their attributes in an odd substitution of sorts.

Joachim Patinir, the visionary Netherlandish painter who set his small figures from Christian tales amid beautiful panoramic views of mountains, waterways, lush trees, and forests, is cited as a proponent of the widespread idea at the time that nature's beauty is subservient to the religious experience and story. However, Altdorfer's revolution swayed towards evincing the

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fear and harshness evoked by the dense forests of his native Germany as an independent entity, with no relationship to the stories of the Bible or Classical literature and myths in any way. In the long run, one also can see in these frightening German landscapes the source of a nationalistic pride in their terrors. This attitude eventually leads as an almost natural path to the unflinching murderous aspects of National Socialism.

Taking on landscape from a different direction is Alejandro G. Iñárritu's 2015 film *The Revenant*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Hugh Glass, a guide for trappers in the 1823 wilderness of America. After his group are attacked by an Arikara Indian war party, whom the film also follows as they search for the Chief's kidnapped daughter, they are forced to hide the furs they've gathered. Abandoning their boat, they make the long trek on foot through the harsh terrain back to the safety of their fort. Along the way, Glass is horribly wounded in a bear attack and it is decided that two men, Fitzgerald and Bridger, along with Glass's half-Pawnee Indian son, will remain with him while the others continue in greater haste to safety to get help. The greedy, brutal Fitzgerald, played by British actor Tom Hardy, completely unrecognizable with his wild eyes, scarred head from an earlier Indian attack, and magnificently cadenced American accent,

murders Glass's son and leaves Glass to die. He and the young Bridger, from whom he's concealed his crimes, then make their own way back to the snowbound fort.

The movie displays some of the most startlingly beautiful scenes of landscape shown in film history. Few of us can say we've seen these isolated scenes of wonder in person. The rub is that we're seeing and experiencing them either in a movie theater or at home on television. We are thoroughly divorced from their tangible reality. The scenes in *The Revenant*, shot in Canada, America, and Argentina, call on us to say, "I can't believe I live on the same planet where these forests and mountains, waterfalls and rivers, exist at this very moment." It's almost like another world, completely independent from our reality.

During *The Revenant's* scenes of incredibly harsh violence, Iñárritu pans the camera on the surrounding environment and amplifies the rustling of trees shown trembling wildly in the cold, as if nature itself is admitting to the terrible and cruel conditions in which the planet must live in. Glass drags his torn up body through the grueling terrain because he is bent on having his revenge on the soulless Fitzgerald. He is engulfed by a desperate instinct to kill the man who has murdered his son, and Iñárritu seems to imply that by living in this beautiful yet merciless landscape, there is a natural progression that mankind will revert to animalistic behavior. Violence is thus viewed tragically as an inevi-

table and inherent reaction to the natural landscape in which the species lives. This is in spite of all of man's self-awareness of his unique situation in the animal world. Although the movie's characters, from the fur trappers to the Indian tribesmen, resort to such violence, the Native Americans seemingly live closer in spirit to the land than the Americans or Europeans.

Glass, during his painstaking journey to the fort, chances upon a Pawnee man also suffering from the elements, who helps Glass. This unexpected kindred spirit feeds Glass, shares his horse, and tends to his wounds (he is later found by Glass hung from a tree with a French sign on his body callously mocking him as a savage). In the riveting scene where Glass first meets him, the Pawnee chants his own story of sorrow while looking up in defeated resignation into the cold night sky. Iñárritu purposely does not have the character's voice exactly match his lips as he speaks, as if the tale of displacement, loss of family, of wandering, is a song for the ages, the sorrowful tragic tale in both the undocumented and recorded history of mankind's violence.

The lesson from Professor Wood's book and from the film may be that the pervasive violence of the human species is the inevitable outcome of living in the midst of harsh and beautiful nature, which can in turn lead one to wonder if the urban terrain leaves some of the unenlightened among us with an ingrained impetus to behave in a similar manner.



Black History Month

"Freedom is never given; it is won."
- A. Philip Randolph

Honoring the Journey

Our Vision, Our Voice, Our Legacy

Facing the Music: Life as a Born Again Musician

OWEN CLARK

When I was twenty-eight I had a third-life crisis. Well, let's be honest, my whole twenties were a series of quarter to third-life crises, but for whatever reason, this one stuck. I've always been prone to obsessions. Some on the fairly bizarre end of the spectrum—collecting pipes and cigars when I was nine years old; some more pragmatic—lifting weights or riding motorcycles. But it's always the same story, my life becomes transformed, consumed with an intense singular focus, dedicated to achieving some lofty goal. During the early stages of a new hobby, nothing else matters. The problem is, they never last. My friend calls them my 'kicks'. In the midst of a kick I can convince myself that I've a puncher's chance of attaining Ryan Reynolds-like abs, or hauling a bike around a race track quicker than Valentino Rossi. Then, after the euphoric excitement subsides, I realize that I'm destined to be just another puny guy getting buried under a 175lb barbell; or that the legends of Moto GP that I idolize started racing bikes when they were three years old, and possess a near psychopathic lack of fear, whereas I'm afraid to walk past groups of teenagers on the street. Then a depression/hopelessness follows, then onto a new hobby! Rinse and repeat. It's a timeless formula that's served me well on my path to becoming a jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Music has been a recurring theme with these kicks. When I was fourteen I saw the movie *Desperado*. A mid-nineties hit starring Antonio Banderas as the ultra-slick, mysterious Mariachi man making his way through the violent drug towns of the Mexican desert to avenge the murder of his lover, and the maiming of his fretting hand by a local cartel leader, aided by a guitar case laden with firearms. I'm not exactly sure what triggered my obsession, perhaps the scene in which El Mariachi uses his guitar headstock to render a man holding a woman up at knifepoint unconscious (mid performance), but I became utterly hooked, watching it over and over again, isolating the exquisite Spanish guitar licks amongst scenes of gun-slinging bloodbaths. I, of course, immediately purchased a classical guitar, insisting that it come with a hard case should I ever need to carry a small arsenal to wage war on the drug dealers of Sheffield, England. I would later find out that one of my current guitar heroes, John Mayer, was inspired to play af-

ter seeing Michael J. Fox in the movie *Back to the Future*. I may lack his fame or virtuosic skills, but I feel my inspiration was slightly cooler.

In the coming weeks I would play several hours a day, diligently teaching myself, listening to my dad's John Williams records in awe, dreaming of lightning fast fingers and an eventual mastery of the instrument. Not soon after, on my fifteenth birthday, I got an electric guitar, which I covered in electrical tape in an attempt to emulate my new hero, [Edie Van Halen](#). I still maintained focus over the next couple of years, eventually fronting a band, but despite my guitar teacher cutting me loose following his declaration that he'd taught me all I needed to know, I never felt like I truly understood the instrument. I took up the saxophone, which became my new primary focus (amongst other things), and while I never stopped playing guitar, as you might have guessed the obsession became a distant memory in the years to come.

Cut to twenty-eight, I finally said enough is enough. That late-twenties malaise, in which the impending doom of your thirties encourages you to take life by the scruff of the neck, had gotten a hold of me good. Figuring I'd safely made it past twenty-seven, the age that had tragically consumed several of my musical heroes, including Jimi Hendrix himself, it was time to become the next sensation. I started teaching myself guitar theory, diatonic intervals, the five patterns, dyads, triads, extensions, alterations: all that jazz (pun intended). I'll spare the boring details, but after a few months of this utterly painstaking, slow and laborious process, it all started to click. This coincided with my coming home for Christmas,



OWEN CLARK/NATURAL SELECTIONS

My small but growing NY-style home studio

dusting off my gorgeous made in America Fender Stratocaster, criminally neglected under my bed for several years. I forgot how fun it was to just noodle around on an electric guitar (I had been teaching myself on an acoustic, fingerpicking style, slightly trickier/duller), sliding through my newly learnt scale and arpeggio patterns, bending strings; I remembered what I used to love about playing, and felt like all the good stuff was still to come.

When I returned to a desolate New York January, I purchased a worn-brown American made Gibson Les Paul. In case you're not familiar, in conveniently simplistic terms guitarists often tend to think in terms of [Les Paul](#) or [Stratocaster](#), and being a life-long Strat guy it was time for a new beginning. Switching to electric and armed with my newly acquired theory, playing no longer became a chore. I went from an hour a day to between three and four. On weekends I would spend entire days transcribing Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughn. I felt like I had learnt a new lan-

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guage, since I was able to understand exactly what these gods were doing, and exactly why it worked, rather than just learning by rote memorization as I'd done in the past. The guitar is a funny old instrument, due to the numbering of the strings and frets, you can learn music from [tablature](#) (a six line notation system where each line represents a string and notes are represented by fret numbers) and thus never really understand what you're playing.

During the next few months I applied a renewed focus to becoming fully proficient at playing the blues, rock and jazz on electric, and fingerpicking style folk, pop and blues on acoustic. This leads me to another intriguing aspect of the guitar, its extremely multifaceted nature. There are several ways to skin a cat, and even more ways to play a guitar. Fingerpicking Spanish guitar requires a very, very different skillset from hair-metal style shredding; as does playing bottleneck slide blues; as does improvising over fast chord changes on a jazz chart. But to progress from that intermediate stage where so many of us tend to reside, to that elusive advanced stage, you're kind of expected to know how to do it all. You also *want* to do it all. I find the majority of music I hear on guitar as fascinating as it is pleasing to the ear, and setting your sights on new genres can be as satisfying as juggling them is frustrating, one of my many love/hate relationships with the instrument.

Nothing seems to draw me to the guitar like the blues. Clapton put it best with "If you hand me a guitar, I'll play the blues. That's the place I automatically go." There's just something so deeply satisfying about sliding and bending through the same old blues licks that were born out of all that pain and suffering on the Mississippi Delta. Pondering how extreme adversity engendered such soul-stirring music. With that in mind, I set my first major goal of playing in Big Ed's Blues Jam at [The Red Lion](#) on Bleecker Street, a stage that's frequented by exceptionally talented professional musicians including the resident grouchy blues master himself, [Ed Sullivan](#) (and coincidentally shares the same name as the Sheffield pub where I used to hone my jazz-sax chops at jam sessions as a teen). Leaving my guitar at home, I set out for a little primer one Monday night in April, surveying the talent and thinking about how I'd shape up, having only been playing chord-based blues improvisation for a couple of months at this point. Obviously

I was hoping to see a bunch of mediocre musicians fumbling their way around a few tunes, *my people*. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and I was instead awe-struck at the level of talent on display. Basically the best blues I had ever seen live, and I was somehow supposed to rock up to the stage and hold my own. Seemed like a tall task. I went back home and spent the next few weeks practicing like hell in a seemingly futile attempt to play without making a fool of myself by the end of May.

Eventually I ponied up the courage to walk on stage, guitar in hand. A lot of people I speak with are amazed that these jam sessions work at all. After all, you have a group of musicians that have never seen each other before in their lives, getting on stage to play a number together perfectly in sync and in tune, with about fifteen seconds to confer. It's not quite as difficult as it sounds; thankfully the blues is fairly simple and generally revolves around one well-known [chord-progression](#), with the chords being referred to by numbers relative to the root of the key you're playing in. But still having not set foot on a stage since I was eighteen, only having a vague idea of what I was expected to play definitely added to the nausea sweeping through my body. Once the song started and I dropped in with some rhythm chords, I realized just how different performance is to bedroom rock starring. My hands were shaking to the point that I could barely fret chords. When it came time for my guitar solo (customarily everyone on a lead instrument gets a solo, indicated with a nod from the bandleader) it was genuinely like that classic [scene](#) in the movie *Old School*, where Will Ferrell reels off a long-winded answer to a complex question in a debate competition then asks, "What happened? I blacked out." As I was walking to the subway, complaining about how badly I choked, my girlfriend started playing a clip on her phone of a guitar solo, to which I said 'that sounds alright, who was that?', then grabbing the phone I see my miserable looking mug, sternly concentrating on hitting notes I had no recollection of playing. Not that I was Muddy Waters of course, but I think I just about held my own.

Over the next few weeks I attended a few more times, getting slightly more comfortable on stage and eventually doing a few tunes as the band leader, singing and playing. However, becoming dissatisfied with sitting around for several hours on a Monday night to play two songs (it's like they don't even appreciate that some of us have

bedtimes), I started a new chapter: writing my own music to perform as a soloist. I gravitated towards singer/songwriter style acoustic music (I just have a lot of feelings!). I let fly with my hands every Sunday afternoon, and managed to pen down a few semi-interesting progressions and riffs, scribbling down accompanying lyrics and forming a few rough songs to work with.

This has probably been the most challenging and interesting aspect of my musical journey. You don't really think about it until you do it, but coming up with a completely original sound from scratch, when the sole creative burden lies on you, is actually pretty darn difficult. There are all sorts of decisions you have to contend with, and none of them came easy to me. Even something seemingly simple like singing in your natural voice is really an open-ended question. A lot of Englishmen like myself emulate American accents when we sing; others honor their native tongue (proudly representing my hometown, Alex Turner of *The Arctic Monkeys* is pretty far on this end of the spectrum). Lyrics are another particularly tricky subject to contend with. Some choose the direct literal approach; others favor a more abstract poetic tone. Both can be exceptionally effective at delivering a poignant message; both can be exceptionally effective at making a vocalist look lame as hell, where the line is drawn is completely in the eye of the beholder, adding to the complexity of the task at hand. It's also very, very unnerving sharing your deepest darkest feelings with anyone that happens to be listening. I still struggle with this, and choose to essentially code my lyrics, steeping in metaphor to the point where the subject matter is semi-unrecognizable. Perhaps an unwise choice, but the alternative truly offends my closed-off English sensibilities. As one of my favorite artists Banks [says](#), "sharing music is like giving away your children." Lastly the music itself, again probably hard to appreciate until you try, but there's such an incredibly fine line between one sound and another that you can find yourself switching between reggae and emo while you're trying to write jazz. You're striving for an original sound while building off of your influences; trying to keep it simple while delving into the complex; toeing the line between standing out in the crowd or being *that guy*. Essentially, it's a minefield.

I set forth one steamy August night to perform my songs at a local open mic night, at [The Graham Bar](#) in East Williams-

burg. It was a nervy walk, intensified by the constant appearance of ginormous rats scurrying from hot stinking piles of trash. My roommate and I coined it ‘rat city’, where stars are born. The venue itself was equally inauspicious, a hot shabby back room in a fairly deserted bar. But just like my earlier forays into the blues, I was once again amazed at the level of talent on display. I performed my allotted three songs as best as I could, attained a pretty good reception from the audience, and made some unquestionably hilarious wisecracks (honestly). All in all, a success.

I’ve played several times since that night, but I’ve never quite matched the sense of satisfaction I felt walking home that evening. In relative terms I’m of course still a newbie, but it seems to me like it never gets easy. When I hear the nasality of my voice on the mic or recording; hit a bum note on guitar; or follow a vocalist with pipes like a steam train; that sense of imposter syndrome really forces you to constantly ques-

tion what you’re doing there. I suspect it’s an issue that plagues the creative community in general, especially here in the naked city, where inescapable talent surrounds us. Music is a particularly curious character, there’s no obvious formula for success. Some have talent coming out the wazoo, only to be scoffed at as ostentatious bores; some possess little in the sense of objective skill or creativity, but seem to strike a chord with their listeners that can’t be argued with. I find myself constantly analyzing anything that falls on my ears, picking apart composition, melody, harmony, rhythm—and while I’ve got a pretty good handle on how the music’s made, there’s always a faint whiff of pixie dust that makes it truly *work*, hooking us in time and time again, toying with our emotions like only music can.

And what of my obsession now? When I think back to last year, the flames have unquestionably died down, but the embers still glow. I no longer harbor hopes of becoming the next Jeff Buckley, Gary Clark Jr., or John Mayer; moving to Nashville to find work as a session guitarist; or attending Julliard as a

precocious thirty-year-old man. I’m painfully aware of the fact that there are countless people out there, far, far more talented than I could ever hope to be, and far hungrier for a taste of the limelight. But I persevere. I still play every day—jazz, blues and rock before work in the morning; original acoustic material, repertoire and transcription after work, until ten, every night. My social life suffers, but it’s a sacrifice I feel inclined to make—though thankfully I only have one or two friends at the best of times. When it all comes together I feel like I’m channelling Jimi; but mostly, I feel like [Ross Geller](#). Not a day goes by where I don’t stress about some aspect of my playing or my music. I experience bouts of elation on the odd occasions when I’m satisfied, but they’re increasingly fleeting, without fail extinguished either through the joylessness of repetition or the despair of inadequacy relative to the legends I so worship. Some days my guitar feels like a burden that I’ll forever carry, some days it feels like a blessing that can deliver a state of joy like no other. But whatever it brings me, I’m still along for the ride.

The Face Behind the Mask

GUADALUPE ASTORGA

Do you remember the Greek myth of Narcissus? It’s the story of an attractive and arrogant man that fell deeply in love with his own face reflected on the water, to the point of losing all interest in life when the reflection was not visible. He died looking at the pond, with no other desire than gazing at his own image.

We have all probably encountered someone like this in our lives. Whether it is that popular guy at high school, the wife that spends two hours in front of the mirror, the husband, the impulsive boss, the public celebrity, the writer, the actor or even politicians, anybody can show some signs of narcissism. The problem begins when it becomes pathologic.

At first glance, people with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) seem extremely confident, fearless, shameless, and self-sufficient. However, researchers and clinicians investigating these behaviors have found that they are actually a mask to cover low self-esteem, fear, shame, and lack of empathy. People with NPD have the need to be admired, valued over others, and expect to be treated as superiors.

More frequent in men than women,



NPD is rarely treated by itself since it is often accompanied by more severe conditions such as depression, substance abuse, paranoia, eating or bipolar disorders. The causes of this personality disorder are not completely clear, but it has strong hereditary and social components. It’s often incubated during childhood, and blooms in adolescence and early adulthood. The major problem with NPD is not what happens with the individual itself, it’s what hap-

pens to others. It is common that people surrounding narcissists get humiliated, discredited, disregarded and disrespected by them. It is also common that in order to surpass the fear of falling short, narcissists develop a need for achievement, self-enhancement, perfectionism, and snobbery. However, society rewards these kinds of behaviors, especially in public personalities like artists and politicians. In a culture where success is overvalued and measured in comparison to others, NPD can drive individuals into privileged positions at the expense of others. The famous phrase by Machiavelli “the end justifies the means” is a magnificent example of the approach that these individuals can take in order to achieve their goals. But one can imagine that this is a double-edged sword, since the same attributes that brought them to success could end up dispelling their beloved ones away. In the end, patients with NPD are not aware of their condition and do not seek treatment by themselves. It is often a harmed third party that requests mental healthcare for an individual with NPD.

Do you know any politicians exhibiting any of these symptoms?

The New Second Avenue Line. Is the Q the A to your Q?

JOHANNES BUHEITEL

First, there were horse-drawn wagons. Then, during the industrial revolution, the steam engine took over and ultimately helped to win the West. But all of these achievements seem to pale in comparison to what the venerable Metropolitan Transport Authority, MTA for short, has unveiled on New Year's Day: The new Q train extension, which for the first time in thousands, nay, millions of years, connects the rural more eastern side of a part of the Upper East Side to downtown Manhattan.

But jokes aside, it might seem weird to outsiders, the very intimate relationship we New Yorkers have with our subway system. A big part of the reason being that most of us don't have a car and heavily rely on the old underground railway system to get to work, to this new must-go restaurant in Bushwick, or that special Starbucks with just the right amount of distraction to musefully work on our screenplays. Of course, this dependence has its downsides, most dramatically felt when trains aren't running properly, which, let's face it, is all the time. In fact, the MTA has an actual smartphone app solely dedicated to informing us about service changes during the weekend (called "The Weekender")! But wherever you are on the MTA love/hate spectrum (please don't get me started on the F train!), you have to acknowledge the sheer size of the operation: 6407 subway cars distributed among 35 lines running on a total length of 380 km (236 mi), and transporting over 5 million people on a typical weekday (over 1.7 billion (with a B!) per year). Which by the way happens 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To the MTA's credit, they are, at least for the most part, keeping this beast running. In addition, they are even trying to further expand the network and this is where the new Second Avenue line comes in.

This feat has been a long time coming. Originally proposed almost a century ago, the actual construction never got off the ground mainly due to the Great Depression kicking in. However, the plans were brought back on the table after the demolition of the Second and Third Avenue elevated tracks (1942-55) left the Lexington Avenue line (served by the 4, 5 and 6 trains) as the only option for commuters on the Upper East Side. And everyone living and/or working there today knows that, particularly during the week, those trains are bursting at the seams. Construction of the first tunnels began in 1972, but had to be halted again in



JOHANNES BUHEITEL/NATURAL SELECTIONS

1975 due to New York City's fiscal issues at the time. Nonetheless, the city's development never stopped, leading to an ever increasing number of subway commuters, further exacerbating the situation on the Lexington Avenue lines. Finally, in 2007, after thirteen years of (re-)planning (and, of course, many quarrels about costs and the actual route), the second attempt to build the Second Avenue Subway was undertaken. According to the MTA's vision, the new line will be built in four construction phases that will take... actually, no one knows how long it will take; The MTA isn't even trying to give an estimate. What we do know is that the fully completed line is supposed to run along Manhattan's east side from the financial district (Hanover Square) all the way up to East Harlem (East 125th Street). And the other thing we know is that, as of last month, the first construction phase extending the Q line to the Upper East Side has been completed, baffling the natural skeptic/cynic that is alive and well in every New Yorker's soul.

The daredevil that I am, I have already logged a sizable number of rides on the new Q, which connects the Lexington Avenue-63rd Street station with three brand new stations on the Upper East Side's Second Avenue at 72nd, 86th and 96th Streets. So what's the verdict? Is the new Q faster, better, stronger? For everyone at the Tri-Institutions and around, the answer is a resounding... it de-

pends. It depends on where you live but even more, whether you do a lot of dining, shopping, etc. on the Upper East Side. Personally, I do like the new Subway. I'm saying this, not because the new stations are really gorgeous (which they are!), and also not because I get to work significantly faster (and when it's raining, probably drier as the closest entry to the 72nd Street station is already on 2nd Avenue/69th Street). I'm saying this, because I do enjoy certain places on the Upper East Side, which were inconvenient to get to from work, because walking to Lex just to ride the subway for one stop and then walk back to 2nd Avenue doesn't really make sense. But also areas that are further uptown (and would make a little more sense to take the 6 train) are now easier to reach, like the one around 86th Street, where you might find me shopping at Fairway (and by Fairway, I of course mean Shake Shack) or going to the East 86th Street Cinema (again, Shake Shack). So overall, even if the new subway might not revolutionize your way of living, it at least opens up some more possibilities to travel to this mystical northern territory. And whether or not you've already acquainted yourself with the Upper East Side yet, now is the perfect time to get to know some great new places around Second Ave, and I'm sure that soon we will see each other buying bread at Orwasher's, slurping ramen at Mei Jin or inhaling a burger at... well, you know where.



This Month Natural Selections Features Johannes Buheitel, a postdoctoral scientist in the Jallepalli Lab at MSKCC, and a member of the Natural Selections Editorial Board.

INTERVIEW BY GUADALUPE ASTORGA



How long have you been living in the New York area?

As of this month, I've been living here for 1.5 years.

Where do you currently live? Which is your favorite neighborhood?

I live on Roosevelt Island. There are so many great neighborhoods in NYC. I typically enjoy areas that are a bit under the radar but still have great places to go to. One of these areas would be Astoria, but I've also been hanging out in Bushwick lately.

What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated?

Overrated: Times Square. Big lights? Broadway glamour? More like suffocating in a sea of tourists, while getting your pockets picked.

Underrated: Home cooking. I know, it's hard especially in NYC where you have these great options to dine out or order in. Also, cooking at home is often more

expensive and then there's the whole dish situation afterwards. But on the other hand, preparing a meal for your friends and loved ones can be a very rewarding experience.

What do you miss most when you are out of town?

Definitely the food. You have authentic cuisine from just about all over the world right at your fingertips when you live here. When I'm back in Germany, especially during Christmas and it's cold outside, I sometimes catch myself daydreaming about a hot bowl of spicy ramen (not the kind you buy at Gristedes of course!).

Has anything (negative or positive) changed about you since you became one of us "New Yorkers"?

I feel that I've become more impatient, something that I particularly notice when I'm out of town; Why is everyone moving SO slow?

If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be?

That's easy: the insane rents!

What is your favorite weekend activity in NYC?

My cop-out answer is: explore the city. This includes anything between walking around a new neighborhood, checking out a new restaurant or eating food I've never had before, going to see some weird exhibition, or going bar hopping in Soho.

What is the most memorable experience you've had in NYC?

That's a tough question, because you can experience so many memorable things

here. But I have to say, the moments that emotionally stick with me the most are very mundane ones. Like when I'm just taking a stroll with my fiancé through a nice neighborhood such as Greenpoint. It's a weekend, the sun is out, and we're just talking. It's in these moments, where you get to feel a sense of calm, and counterintuitively, as if you were in sync with the city.

Bike, MTA or walk it?

In general, I love to walk the streets, which really allows me to feel the pulse of the particular neighborhood I'm in. But if I need to get somewhere, particularly when it's far, I switch to my bike or the subway.

If you could live anywhere else, where would that be?

So far at least, my plan is to go back to Germany after my postdoc. There, I'd really love to live in Munich, which for me has the right mix between modernity and traditionalism. But if I leave out Germany, then I could see myself living in Amsterdam, which is very beautiful, diverse, and just perfect to explore by bike.

Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker?

According to some, you have to have been living here for at least ten years, while others say only if you've been mugged at knifepoint, you're allowed to call yourself a New Yorker. When I think of a typical New Yorker, I think of a busy person, who may be very direct (this is what many outsiders mistake to be rudeness), but is ultimately very kind and helpful. I'd like to think of myself as that person, so I'm at least a New Yorker by heart.

Quotable Quote

"Follow through on all your generous impulses. Do not question them, especially if a friend needs you; act on his or her behalf. Do not hesitate! Don't sit around speculating about the possible problems or dangers. As long as you let your reason lead the way, you will be safe. It is our duty to stand by our friends in their hour of need."

(Epictetus, 55 – 135)



For Your Consideration

And They're Off! Edition

JIM KELLER

As I've said many times one can liken the Oscar race to a horserace with each studio betting on its thoroughbreds hoping to place in the end. The studio is the owner, public relations is the jockey, and the horse is the actor or film in the analogy. Here I've included my rankings

as they stood on Oscar nominations eve—the number in parentheses indicates my placement following nominations. I chose eight nominees for Best Picture out of a possible ten. All other categories reflect five nominees. The picks that appear in black text within the table were my nominee picks, those in red represent actual nominees that I had not selected.

It's worth mentioning that from the moment I saw *Nocturnal Animals*, I knew that

Michael Shannon would get a nomination, as evidenced in last month's column. But as the race headed toward the finish line, Aaron Taylor-Johnson started appearing on the precursor circuit with a win at the Golden Globes and a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) nomination, so I went with him.

With that, I give you my predictions as they currently stand:

2016 OSCAR CONTENDERS					
Best Picture	Best Director	Best Actor	Best Actress	Best Supporting Actor	Best Supporting Actress
La La Land (Summit Entertainment) [1]	Damien Chazelle - La La Land [1]	Casey Affleck - Manchester by the Sea [1]	Emma Stone - La La Land [1]	Mahershala Ali - Moonlight [1]	Viola Davis - Fences [1]
Moonlight (A24) [2]	Barry Jenkins - Moonlight [2]	Denzel Washington - Fences [3]	Natalie Portman - Jackie [2]	Jeff Bridges - Hell or High Water [4]	Michelle Williams - Manchester by the Sea [2]
Manchester by the Sea (Roadside Attractions) [3]	Kenneth Lonergan - Manchester by the Sea [4]	Ryan Gosling - La La Land [2]	Meryl Streep - Florence Foster Jenkins [4]	Dev Patel - Lion [3]	Naomie Harris - Moonlight [3]
Hidden Figures (20th Century Fox) [4]	Denis Villeneuve - Arrival [3]	Andrew Garfield - Hacksaw Ridge [4]	Isabelle Huppert - Elle [3]	Aaron Taylor-Johnson - Nocturnal Animals	Nicole Kidman - Lion [4]
Lion (The Weinstein Co.) [5]	Garth Davis - Lion	Vigo Mortenson - Captain Fantastic [5]	Amy Adams - Arrival	Michael Shannon - Nocturnal Animals [2]	Octavia Spencer - Hidden Figures [5]
Arrival (Paramount Pictures) [6]	Mel Gibson - Hacksaw Ridge [5]		Ruth Negga - Loving [5]	Hugh Grant - Florence Foster Jenkins	
Fences (Paramount Pictures) [7]				Lucas Hedges - Manchester by the Sea [5]	
Hell or High Water (CBS Films / Lionsgate) [9]					
Hacksaw Ridge (Summit Entertainment) [8]					

Lesson 4

New York City Dialect New York-ese

AILEEN MARSHALL

Hey guys! This is another typical New York City greeting. Welcome to lesson four in our series on the New York City dialect.

To recap last month's lesson, the R is often dropped in words and replaced with an "ah" or "aw" sound. Our vocabulary words were *heah*, *rivah* and *mawnin*. Here are some more examples of them used in a sentence.

Don't *ya* just love it *heah*?

His body washed up on the East *Rivah* last night.

You *gotta* get up early in the *mawnin* to get a seat on the subway.

Other examples of the dropped R are water, fear and father. Here are some examples of these words used in a sentence.

New York City used to have the best tap *wada* in the country.

If you live in the city long enough, you lose your *feah* of roaches.

My *fadda* has a long commute downtown to work every day.

This month's lesson:

Some words in the city dialect have an

elongated A sound, sounding like "aw." The most famous example is the word talk. In the city, it is pronounced "tawk."

Here are some examples of words using the elongated A used in a sentence. These words are: *tawk*, *thawt*, *dawg*, and *cawffe*. Click on the links to hear the pronunciation.

What's wrong with da way I **tawk** ([sound](#))?

Da **thawt** ([sound](#)) of leavin never crossed my mind.

Da law says you have to pick up after your **dawg** ([sound](#)).

He gets his **cawfee** ([sound](#)) from da same street cart every *mawnin*.

Another way to absorb the culture and language of the city is to go on a walking tour. There are numerous companies in the city that provide either guided tours, or maps for self-tours. Probably the most famous one is [Big Onion Walking Tours](#). They are often led by a history graduate student who has been certified by the city. They have tours focusing on history, culture, architecture, and food. I suggest trying either the Brooklyn Heights

or the Fort Greene tour to get a good look at how typical New York City residents live. Another good source to try is [Frommers](#). They have a lot of good information on all sorts of tours and attractions in the outer boroughs. They have information on a replica trolley tour in the Bronx, a pizza tour in Brooklyn, and a guide to the various neighborhoods along the 7 train in Queens.

Watch next month for a lesson in the



A New Encounter on Stage: SugaGold

ALICE MARINO

As soon as you arrive in New York City, you immediately learn that there is not much time to get bored. We are surrounded by tons of things to do, places to explore, museums to visit, new restaurants to try, street fairs, street art, street performances, and the list goes on. This city offers such a unique variety of activities that somehow allows it to feed the needs of its huge population.

For example, I have always been a live music addict, but while getting to know the potential of this city, at some point I became more selective with my choices. I began to be intrigued by concerts which took place in smaller venues, rather than giant locations. These spots became my favorite. First of all, they are friendlier, more welcoming, and they also have better and cheaper beers. Second, seeking out these locations gives you the chance to explore the city deeper, getting to better know its neighborhoods, and appreciate its many facets. Third, in these small venues, the atmosphere gets creative and the connection between the audience and the new emerging musicians becomes special; not to mention that you'll often be extremely surprised by the quality and level of the music. Obviously, there are many ways (web, apps, friends, magazines, etc.) to find out when and where concerts are happening, but recently I found out that the best way is to be invited by a member of the band: Guadalupe Astorga, who is a neuroscientist at Rockefeller University, and also a web designer and contributor for *Natural Selections*. Excited and full of curiosity for the new musical adventure, a few friends and I decided to get ready to face a chilly winter night out and head to Harlem to experience the sounds of SugaGold live.

But first, let's shed some light on this band. SugaGold is an independent rock/funk band, formed at the beginning of 2016 by the interaction of five talented minds, not only with regards to music. In fact, three of them are neuroscientists at Rockefeller University and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, one is a language researcher, and another is a producer and musician. This collaboration started from a mutual passion for music and from the desire to create an original and innovative



instrumental mix. The incredibly powerful voice of Natalia Sáez, who also contributes with the flute and indigenous instruments, harmonizes perfectly with the sound of the drums and electronic notes of Guadalupe Astorga, the drums and percussions played by Ben Deen, the lead guitar of Martin Luque, and the bass of Rodrigo Pavão. The result is an incredible new sound, born out of the creativity of each component, and by the mix of their personal influences and backgrounds. Apparently, "mishmash" is their key word. Did you know that even their band name comes from a mixture of their beloved pets' names, Sugar and Goldie? The name was supposed to be temporary, but over the time, they liked it and never changed it. SugaGold started to perform around

New York City quite fast, considering that the band was brand new. Not bad, guys!

The concert was hosted at Shrine World Music Venue in Harlem. This is a multimedia arts and culture venue founded in 2007 by musicians and music fans. Because it is primarily a location for bands who would like to promote themselves, you can always find passionate musicians ready to face a challenge, while having fun with the audience. Since we didn't arrive late, for once, we rewarded ourselves with a drink, sitting at the table just in front of the stage, looking at the band preparing for their show. Stage fright? Panic? Tension? What are those? SugaGold were definitely comfortable on stage, and an energetic flow of funky notes came out from the speakers, as if it were the most natural thing on earth. This formed a perfect match with Natalia's voice, who was also alternating between the flute and the guitar throughout the whole concert. On stage, the performance was very dynamic, as different members of the band would change roles depending on the song; for example, the drummer would change roles to a percussionist, and vice versa. They have a good repertoire of pieces, both in English and Spanish, with a strong South American influence. They all virtually owned the stage, as the audience enjoyed the interesting rhythms and vibes coming from their Djembe, guitar, drums, flute, synthesizer, and bass. The quality of the acoustic was very good, despite a brief incident involving a temporarily crackling microphone. Things that happen only in a live performance! As song after song played, their time on stage began to run out, but they managed to steal a few more minutes to play one last song. Oh yes, the crowd didn't give them a break!

When I mentioned my passion for music I truly meant this: an amazing atmosphere created by enthusiastic people gathered together to enjoy music and have a blast! The overall impression of the concert was great, from the choice of the venue to the participation of the audience. I loved the pure energy that the live music released. Their concert was a success and SugaGold have, for sure, a bunch of new fans. I can't wait to see them again on March 17th, at Silvana in New York.

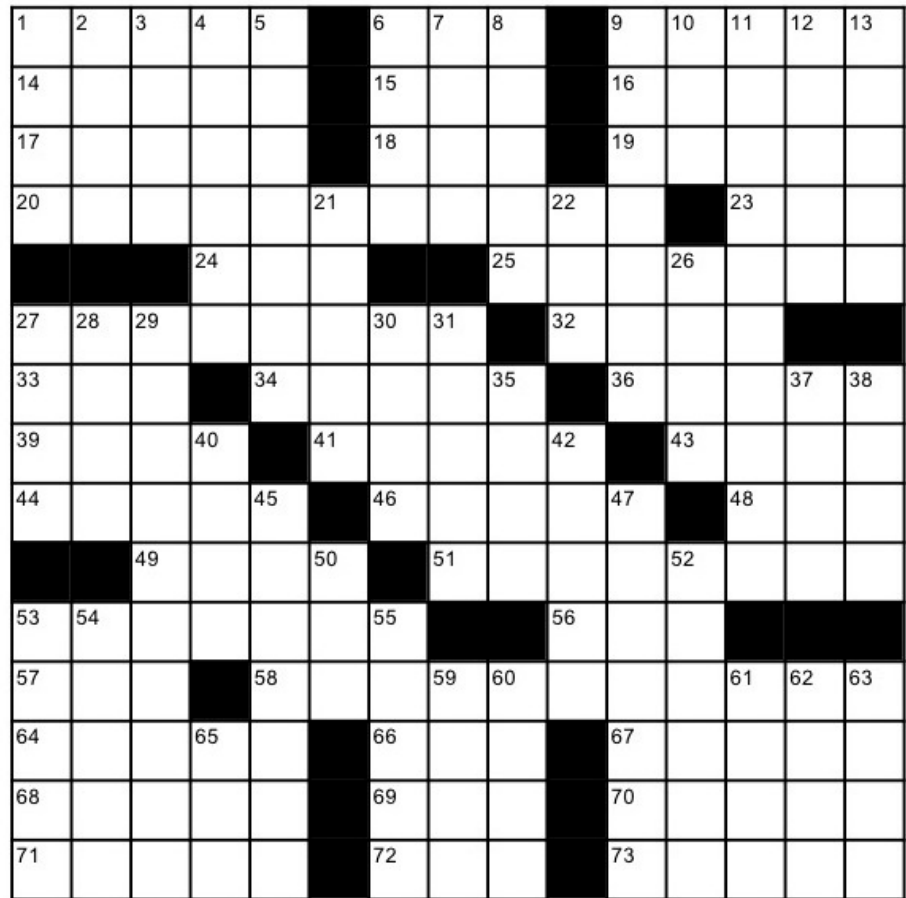
An Embarrassment of Riches

ANONYMOUS

This politically incorrect (some might even say “disgusting”) puzzle comes to you from an anonymous source, known only to Rockefeller alum (1977) George Barany, who is currently on the faculty of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. It was originally published in Natural Selections a year ago, but takes on added significance in view of the events of the past year (particularly since January 20, 2017). Sad! For more about this specific puzzle, including a link to its answer, visit [here](#) and [here](#). More Barany and Friends puzzles can be found [here](#).

Across

1. Sometimes, they're not given
6. Burro, e.g.
9. Oscar's U.K. equivalent
14. Straight: Prefix
15. Word after good or bad
16. Domains
17. “___ In” (Wings hit that begins with “Someone's knockin' at the door”)
18. Sugary drink, often
19. Carl ___, whose September 2015 endorsement of fellow billionaire 58-Across was a “no-brainer”
20. Adjective that does not begin to describe 58-Across
23. McCorvey in a landmark case
24. Pay back?
25. Paddle-wheel craft
27. 58-Across inveighing against the IRS?
32. Apprentice, like 58-Across at electoral politics
33. Woman who raised Cain
34. Universal soul, in Hinduism
36. Acts the rat
39. Lawless princess?
41. “___, Marissa Mayer Are Right; Employees Should Not Work From Home” (February 2013 tweet by 58-Across)
43. Centerfielder on Mets World Series team
44. “58-Across is The World's Greatest ___” (FiveThirtyEight headline, July 2015)
46. Flag-waving, breast-beating “patriot,” like 58-Across
48. Expanded, contracted
49. Carillon clamor
51. Scottish castle that 58-Across is unlikely to be invited to
53. Domains
56. “Ich bin ___ Berliner”
57. LBJ's palindromic “War on Poverty” agcy.
58. DAMN TURD POL, anagrammatically
64. One of three people walking into a bar, in many a joke
66. “Four score and seven years ___ ...”
67. Word before basin or wave
68. Heavenly hunter
69. Try to become President, e.g.
70. Low-budget, in adspeak
71. “Schlonged,” e.g.
72. It may be tapped
73. Reginald ___ (truck driver whose beating was broadcast live during the 1992 Los Angeles riots)



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Down

1. Burrow
2. State where, in 2016, armed militants dubbed Y'all Qaeda and Vanilla ISIS took over federal property: Abbr.
3. Palindromic Holy Roman Emperor
4. “58-Across and ___” (CNN politics headline, July 2015)
5. Home country of pirates that 58-Across vowed to wipe off the face of the earth
6. Berry high in anti-oxidants
7. Sugary drink, often
8. Builder's plans, informally
9. “It's a Wonderful Life” family
10. Great circle path, e.g.
11. Term coined in 1939 to describe a prominent political figure, that is appropriate again today
12. Literally, “big water”
13. Grant on TV
21. Smart
22. Co. founded by Alexander Graham Bell
26. “La donna è mobile,” e.g.
27. Modern callalternative?
28. Profess
29. Underpinning of 58-Across's foreign policy, apparently
30. Key of Vivaldi's “Spring Concerto”
31. Mumbai master
35. Hendryx who sang “Lady Marmalade” with Labelle
37. Rowlands of “A Woman Under the Influence”
38. Pitch
40. On the quiet side
42. Looked over, lasciviously
45. Activity for porkbarrel politicians
47. Missing
50. Durocher who said “Nice guys finish last”
52. Way to serve some Mexican food
53. Palindromic billionaire who blasted 58-Across and Ted Cruz as 11-Downs (December 2015)
54. Unit of wisdom?
55. 58-Across's debate strategy, apparently
59. Malarial fever
60. ___-windedness, a salient feature of 58-Across
61. Japanese soup noodles
62. American politician/educational reformer Horace ___
63. Sneaky maneuver
65. Word said once in France to mean “good” or twice in the U.S. to mean “goodie”

Life on a Roll

Winter's Beauty

ELODIE PAUWELS

<https://elodiepphoto.wordpress.com>

Winter has come!

Winter is probably the best time of the year to take black and white pictures, especially when the sky is cloudy. Frost on a window in

the utility room, frozen leaves in the garden or on the path of the north-facing slopes, and foggy fields are just a few examples of winter's beauty. Enjoy it, until spring springs!



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