

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

NewPhilosopher

BEING HUMAN: ALL ABOUT US



With **The New York Times** **The Big Ideas**

Contents

New Philosopher with content from
The New York Times

3	Editor's letter	66	Being prey ~ Maxim Loskutoff
8	Contributors	72	The evolution of moral outrage ~ Tim Dean
10	Voltairine de Cleyre ~ Peter Strain	78	Nothing but human ~ André Dao
12	News from nowhere	84	Doing away with death ~ Allison Arieff
18	Human growth	86	Confronting agony ~ Ayobami Adebayo
20	Faking intimacy ~ Sherry Turkle	92	Ethical dilemmas ~ Matthew Beard
24	Human Resources ~ Existential Comics	94	The controlling force ~ Will Storr
26	Human trafficking ~ Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore	98	Six thinkers
34	Humans of the Anthropocene ~ Roy Scranton	102	Learning to lose ~ Simon Critchley
38	A fraction of life	108	Ozymandias ~ Percy Bysshe Shelley
40	Cultural warfare ~ Oliver Burkeman	110	The woman at home ~ Carrie Jenkins
46	All about us ~ Martha Nussbaum	113	Sent home to die ~ Cameron Raynes
48	Social utility ~ Dan Ariely	118	Our library
50	The last laugh ~ Antonia Case	120	Documentaries
52	Defining ourselves ~ Ai Weiwei	121	Around the web
54	The basic code ~ Anne Wojcicki	122	What's on
56	Embracing humanity ~ Bernard-Henri Lévy	124	Subscribe
58	Thoughts on...	126	Human divisions ~ Pico Ayer
60	Human beings	130	13 questions: Helena Norberg-Hodge



- 40 -

INTERNET
Cultural warfare
 Oliver Burkeman



- 26 -

SLAVERY
Human trafficking
 Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore



- 78 -

HUMAN RIGHTS
Nothing but human
 André Dao



- 20 -

ROBOTS
Faking intimacy
 Sherry Turkle

- 34 -

ENVIRONMENT

Humans of the Anthropocene

Roy Scranton



- 72 -

MORALITY
Evolution of moral outrage
 Tim Dean



- 52 -

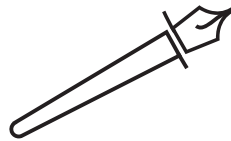
BEING
Defining ourselves
 Ai Weiwei



- 66 -

HUNTING
Being prey
 Maxim Loskutoff

Here we present the winners of *New Philosopher Writers' Award XXI*: power. In top spot is philosopher **Carrie Jenkins**, with her piece "Woman at home". **Cameron Raynes** has taken out second place for his essay "Sent home to die".



The woman at home

by Carrie Jenkins

From the journals of Samuel P. Perceval, bookseller:

Covent Garden, Dec. 15, 1974

This spring, I found a curious letter sewn into the hem of a coat belonging to my late great-aunt Florence. Crudely enveloped in what appeared to be a page torn from a Victorian magazine, the missive was written in a bizarre-looking code of non-alphanumeric symbols. It has taken some months to decipher, but I believe the rendering below is substantially accurate.

It falls to me, now, to decide whether and to whom I should make the contents known. I here omit all names as well as the precise year. I am not sure what prompts such nice feeling—it is no secret,

however, that great-aunt Florence, née Brown, married one James Perceval, my grandfather's brother.

November the thirtieth, 189*

My own D*****,

You must forgive me—I cannot pause for the usual pleasantries. It has happened, just as I intimated to you in my last. The carriage drew up at dawn upon the twenty-third, and my Alice, beside herself at disturbing me so early, came in wringing her hands and babbling about two men at the door who would give her no peace but that they *must* see me. You may imagine the paroxysm that came over me on

learning that they were “dressed ’ead to foot in black, with such a *sinister* look to ’em” as to have given poor Alice what she calls “the collywobbles”. She is a sensitive creature, who may peer into men’s souls with more ease than is generally welcomed in one of her class.

[This line very rushed and messy: SPP] I cannot continue. I must [illegible] as soon [illegible].

December the second

Dearest, let me make account for the abrupt and disjointed nature of my letter.

I am permitted neither pen nor paper in this horrible place. I believe

WINNER

WRITERS' AWARD XXI:
POWER

myself to be in Bethlem, but cannot be sure. Not one among the nurses will confirm my suspicions as to location, nor even that I have been “Burrowed”—which term they pretend not to understand, even as they glance fearfully about when-ever they hear it. Upon arriving here at the mercy of my two—*escorts*, I was stripped most heinously of all possessions, even my vestments, upon entering into what they call the “bath”. My clothes, I was informed, were all to be boiled for the removal of fluxes and pestilences. They were returned after several days, much damaged by this vile treatment, but nothing besides was granted me, even my jewels. I should care little for baubles but that I now find myself without that cameo of your darling face which until this “bath” was my constant companion.

I set myself at once to discover any means by which I might inform you of my situation. Dr. M***** is the resident alienist. Here, he says, is practised “moral treatment” for the cure of the insane. Oh, ho! Believe me, the dark room and the restraints are in daily use—and I read in the eyes of my fellow inmates what these portend. Dr. M***** fairly boasts of his successes with galvanism. I have sworn that if I might spare myself such horrors, I shall do it. I shall do it by any means. So far, I thank goodness, nobody has taken such exception to my person or my conduct as to make tortures needful. It would make you laugh, D*****, but I am become *quiet*. I reserve all opinions, observing those only are subjected to the worst corrections who make themselves loquacious and inconvenient. Nevertheless, my existence here is base in every way and I do not wish to speak of it.

Well, the pompous doctor is extremely keen on the maintenance of records, which must be checked by himself each hour. I cannot but suppose them to represent a most incomplete picture, else there should be a public scandal. But my dear, by careful watching of the desk where the stenographer assists Dr. M***** at the preparation of his records, I have been able to steal away a bottle of her ink one day, a little paper another, and then at last—*coup de grace!*—

her pen whilst she was at her luncheon. It pained me, all the same, how she blanched when Dr. M***** declared that new equipment must be bought from her own wage.

I have secreted my treasures in the water closet, high upon the wall, in a small cavity behind the tank. The nurses do not know I am accustomed to climbing, still less do they imagine that a lady—even a lady lunatic—should scramble upon a window sill inside a privy. The place is so unsanitary that no such cleaning as would disturb my cache appears to be performed from one month to the next.

I must take care not to seem to spend too long in the lavatory. Forgive my brevity, then, and know it is no want of love for you that stays my hand.

December the twenty-fifth

I am unwell. I hear an old carol, yet cannot tell if the sound be near or far, nor even if it be real at all. My head aches worse than I can ever remember.

Do you recall how we would sing together after lessons? I wish you a merry Christmas, my angel, wherever you are. My cruellest torment is that I can devise no stratagem by which this might reach you.

I cannot write more to-day for weeping.

January the third

We are allowed few pass-times in this place, but one to which Dr. M***** does not object is needle-work, which he considers appropriate to the maintenance of a proper feminine demeanor. Such patterns frame themselves in my dreams, and as these dread days creep by I render them out upon my samplers, as though a heart might be stretched taut across a bare circle—would one but look, one might see writ there the terrors of this place, of losing all that is [Here



Dexter Asylum, by Lawrence E. Tilley, 1958, Library of Congress

an illegible word, scored out and over-written several times, possibly *self* or *safe*: SPP].

Dr. M***** does not know how to look. One of the nurses glances at the work, but if she sees more than he then she is a merciful soul, for she says nothing.

February the eighteenth

I can hardly hold my pen to-day! The nurses are careless in their conversation around me of late—perhaps because I no longer speak, they forget that I yet understand speech—and so it is that I have learned Miss. B***** has an uncle in London whose friend, a Mr. Perceval, is rumoured to have been once connected with an “Alleged Lunatics’ Friend Society”! And now I feel *sure* that he shall rescue her—that one of our damned souls is to be saved.

So to my purpose: I must find some way of sending with her this letter, and that without the knowledge of any here, nor even herself—Miss B.***** is

not a careful person and is by no means to be entrusted with a secret.

March the first

Miss. B***** leaves to-morrow! I have it: I shall play upon my reputation as quite the needlewoman, and offer to repair the brocade of her out-door coat for the journey home. Meanwhile I have fashioned a makeshift envelope—we are allowed no material for reading save a few trite novels, but the nurses perforce must supply basic necessities for our toilet and so I have purloined a page ripped from *The Woman at Home* (Lord!), and upon an unprinted portion have inscribed your dear name and address. How my heart ached to recall the beloved city, the streets I long to walk at your side, arm in arm, our boots in step, our dresses switching side to side.

Yet I cannot but feel in this moment as a butterfly in a killing bottle, which in all its desperate flappings

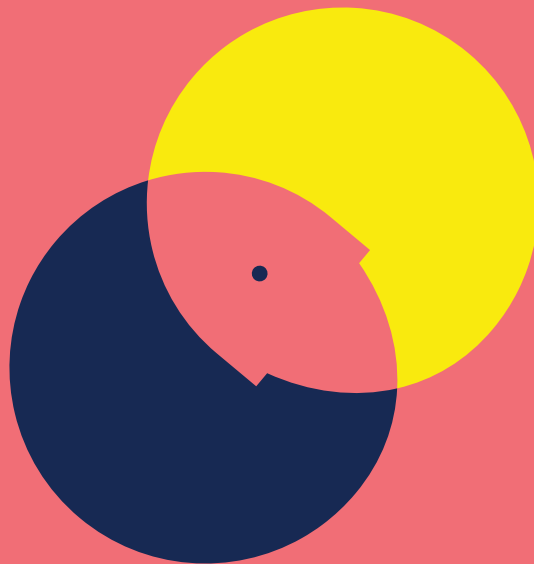
and flutterings destroys its own delicate wings, all the while knowing—for it may still *see*—that there is a world beyond, that there remains to it a hope that this other world may be regained, that just one more beat might suffice ... the precious motion which always before meant flight and freedom, which now so suddenly fails, so incomprehensibly becomes—not impotent, but far worse than that, since it hastens the *degradation* of the hapless spirit trapped within ...

Such fancies cannot be entertained. There is no time. Sweet heart, I commend these words to the hem of a stranger’s coat, trusting that through God’s grace they may reach you, and that you have not forgot our girlish cryptograms. Whatever has been told to you concerning my disappearance is all untrue: you must know how deep, how black is the abyss from which I now beseech you by all means at your disposal to *send help*.

In haste, your loving
V***** ▣

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