

3/16 As of the ides, the new national motto's official: Liquidity, Stupidity, Cupidity. Even as Dasani, Poland Spring, Evian and a host of others vie furiously for the multi-million bottle contract to become the sole supplier for the Halliburton/DOD spring waterboarding program.

In the future, detainees will have the choice of drowning, or believing themselves to be drowning, in: Classic Coke, Diet Coke, Diet Cherry Coke, Mountain Dew and Dr. Pepper. If the interrogatee is deemed fit enough to withstand the extra jolt of caffeine along with the carbonation, well, hell, Red Bull the little haji bastard!

Now if McCain gets to be president, they just might have to make the tongue-loosening liquid of choice Arizona Ice Tea. But hey, he's supposta be agin' that harsh stuff.

Lynndie England as a poster-girl for Starbucks Chai Latte®. Let's run it up the flagpole and see who salutes.

Long ago, in February 2007, you wrote:

Look out your window. A thousand cranes. Does anyone really imagine they will bring good fortune?

It was, in fact, the first sentence of this narrative.

And it only strikes you now that a major structural part of a crane is called the boom – a term brought over from ship-rigging. And what happened yesterday afternoon uptown in Turtle Bay was an uncontrolled lowering of the jib – another

nautical derivation – as well as the boom. The obverse of boom being bust. Time for the turtles to pull their tender parts back into their shells. And for we carapace-less creatures to take similar adaptive precautions, as befits our anatomies.

At the time it lowered unexpectedly, the boom in question was the vertical element of a tower crane helping erect a 43-story condo, nineteen floors of which had been completed. As workers were jumping (raising) the boom up another story, “a piece of steel fell and sheared off one of the ties holding it to the building, causing it to detach and topple, said Stephen Kaplan, an owner of the Reliance Construction Group,” the condo’s builder, to Associated Press.

“‘It was an absolute freak accident,’ Kaplan said. ‘All the piece of steel had to do was fall slightly left or right, and nothing would have happened.’”

A miss *is* as good as a mile, but a hit’s a hit. Still at such times, the Kaplans of the world invariably revert to intoning the chorus of their timeless hymn, *Nearer my act of God to thee*.

Come on baby, fight my lawyer.

I’m tellin’ ya New Yawk, dis construction boom is troo da roof. So heads up! An’ don’t leave home widoutcha K-pot. On second thought, better keep it on at home too. Incoming!

You dream of a time when your as yet unborn grandchild asks you what a condo was, and then, after you explain, looks at you quizzically, trying to imagine what

the world was like when people were daft enough to want to own things that, in any case, could never really be possessed.

The boom, or most of it anyway, came to rest at a jaunty diagonal against a nineteen-story apartment building across the street from the condo being flung skyward by Kaplan's Reliance boyz and their rent-a-crane-and-crew. The builder in turn works for a certain James P. Kenneley, a former NYC fire fighter turned developer.

A *Times* photo dating from 2003, an era when being a real estate speculator might still consider himself groovy – assuming one was unburdened by any nagging doubts about the social good of metastasizing “luxury” highrises all over the city – made a reappearance in the paper this morning, beneath the headline “Developer Who Can See From a Rescuer's View.” In the interview that accompanied the photo back in '03, Kenneley owned as how he enjoyed looking at the buildings he put up: “I changed the skyline of New York – a bit,” he said. “Pretty cool.”



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

The detached jib, however, made no interventions on the skyline, but rather flattened a small building whose ground floor housed a pub named Fubar – which, if memory serves, is an acronym for Fucked Up Beyond All Repair. Yet such are the magical laws within *Times*-world that with a wave of the editorial wand, the singularity of Fubar the bar, with its oddly cutesy-vulgar name, becomes linked, across a breadth of only one column's whiteness with a parallel narrative about the Plaza, the legendary Eloise-storied edifice that signifies real estate of a very different order.



Joe Fornabaio for The New York Times

Thus is an exterior long shot of a big white crane atop a pile of rubble dialecticized with an interior closeup of a giant's white-gloved hand illustrating a fantastical tale headlined "Jeeves of the Plaza."

"The butler, that mainstay of the English manor brought so vividly to life by the likes of P.G. Wodehouse and Kazuo Ishiguro, has not gone the way of the pince-nez or the silver-plated pistol. In fact, over the past 10 or 15 years, the profession has flourished, especially in New York.

"According to David Robinson, a vice president of the International Institute of Modern Butlers, a Florida-based training company whose clients include the Plaza, the borough of Manhattan now has more butlers in private service than any other city in the Western world, including London. Mr. Robinson attributes this in part to the preponderance of people of means in Manhattan.

"More people recognize the value of having a butler in the private home," he

said.

“And more hoteliers, it seems, recognize the value of having a butler, or 17 of them, in a luxury hotel. The ‘hotel butler’ is a new profession, having emerged only in recent years, as hotels from Dubai to Las Vegas have engaged in a kind of arms race, each stockpiling luxuries in an effort to compete against the others for the dollars of an increasingly affluent global elite.

“The Plaza’s butlers, who range in age from 21 to 45, generally come from milieus very different from the ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’ archetype. Unlike most men who practiced the profession in the past, for example, the Plaza’s butlers are unlikely to have spent time in households where it’s understood that Devonshire tea isn’t a beverage but a light meal consisting of tea with milk, warm scones, strawberry jam and clotted cream (never butter).

“By the same token, they tend not to have English accents, or American ones. Cesar Galvez, formerly the houseman at an East 78th Street town house, comes from Peru. Bal Sharma, previously the sommelier and manager of an Indian restaurant in Midtown, was born in Nepal. Benny Slesicki, a former counterman at a Ukrainian diner in the East Village, was raised in Poland.

“Their tutor, Mr. Robinson, is a self-described ‘persnickety Brit.’ On a recent morning, he studied a small room-service table laden with gold-rimmed dishes while a group of butlers in training awaited his reaction.

“‘Always remember,’ Mr. Robinson, a stout, cheery man with silvery hair, told the assembled group, ‘salt to the left and pepper to the right. Why?’

A moment later, he answered his question. ‘Because it’s “salt and pepper,”’ he said. ‘Not pepper and salt.’”



Joe Fornabaio for The New York Times

“Daniel Becker,” the caption reads, “on shoe polishing detail.”

Darktown, where the sun never sets on the gorgeous mosaic, where tall white booms and deep busts of stygian night cast their magnificence into infinite shades of gray. And the scorched earth knows no salt.

Predator missiles rain down on several houses near Wana in southern Waziristan killing at least a dozen people and wounding many more. And Bear Stearns begs, at any price, to crawl up JP Morgan’s ass where its predatory creditors won’t find it.

Fortieth anniversary of the massacre at Son My.

3/17 The toll hits seven in the Turtle Bay crane collapse with three more being discovered this morning. Two of the dead were construction workers and one, very likely, a tourist from Florida. Meanwhile the *Times* reveals itself, at bottom, to be

animist in its beliefs, attributing human emotions to things inorganic. Witness the headline “Fleeing Crane’s Fury, With Neighbors’ Pets in Tow.” I tell you, when those cranes get mad, watch out. Worse yet, what if they begin to incite other construction equipment to similar acts of rage – dare one say terror? – against us? Wherefore Seneca would place the *Times* in the Etruscan camp, for *they believe not that events have a meaning because they have happened, but that they happen in order to express a meaning.*

But then, in the twilight days of Empire, many Romans may have come over to a more Etruscan state of mind. To the *Times*, all things are alive with dangerous potential. We might be attacked at any moment. In fact we’re sure to be attacked, but by whom or what? No one knows. The only course is to tidy up the trauma of each with a post-mortem that includes Mr. Science-style graphs and charts. But the most important thing of all is to *induce anxiety so they never stop reading...*”

“There is something mixed up in the market,” said Edward Rombach, an analyst at Thompson Financial. “The market is eating itself up.”

Don’t sleep.

3/18 This is that moment in the cartoon when Coyote has run off the cliff in pursuit of his ever-tantalizing prey. Midway across the chasm, he looks down, realizes where he’s at, turns quizzically to the audience before dropping like a stone. The camera stays where it is for a long moment, doesn’t track his fall. Sometimes he makes a sound like a bomb dropping, whistling toward its target, other times there’s a long, silent pause before we hear the echo of the crash below. Invariably, the camera shakes to convey the

force of his impact. Occasionally the film cuts to the canyon below and a puff of dust rises where Coyote hit. But then, from the other side of abyss, we hear the *meep-meep* and ricochet sound of the Road Runner as it speeds on.

That crane, that big white crane was highly leveraged.

The bailout or the bullet. Aw heck, the bailout *and* the bullet. The ballot don't figure at all in this game.

And the *Messenger* weighs in with another beauty of a headline: "Poll Shows Most Palestinians Favor Violence Over Talks." That's plus or minus four percentage points, of course.

Torrential rains from Oklahoma to Texas to Ohio, with Missouri bearing the brunt. Floods of a near Biblical scale across the Bible belt.

3/19 Passing of Arthur C. Clarke. To whom we owe, for better or worse, the idea and reality of geosynchronous orbits for satellites. Though whether he envisioned a ring of space crap tracking the sidereal earthgasm $24/7 \times 365$ ad astra who can say.

"Any sufficiently advanced technology," he once proposed, "is indistinguishable from magic." Yes, and as long as the magicalizing part of us colludes, the technology doesn't have to be advanced at all. We'll find magic where we project it, and often miss it where it actually lives. Which, ultimately, is how magic survives us.

When we arrive

Sons and Daughters

We'll make our home on the waters...

Sing the Decembrists.

We will arise from the bunkers

By land, by sea, by dirigible,

We'll leave our tracks untraceable...

...Here all the bombs fade away...

Repeat ad astra.

I am not yet the real crow but only a swallow... the real one is still flying in the sky...

So says Herten, quoting Pugachev, a rebel against Tsarina Katerina in
Stoppard's *Coast of Utopia: Salvage*.

The rains of the Bible belt visit New York, but, like most every other arrival,
they stay only a while, then keep passing through.

Drums are drizzling on a grain of sand

Fading rhythms of a fading land...

...I declare the war is over...

Sang the troubadour Philip David Ochs, *kan ya makan*.

Oh yes, and another book you'd borrowed from Frank: Antonio Muñoz
Molina's *Sepharad*, which opens with an epigraph from Kafka's *The Trial*:

“Yes,” said the usher, “they are accused, everyone you see here is accused.”

“Really?” asked K. “Then they are my comrades.”

3/20 McCain, blue sky bomber of untold Vietnamese, pins on a kippah and reaches out both hands to wedge a prayerful message into a crack in the Western Wall, under the approving eyes of Joe Lieberman, whose fraterno-ecumenical hand rests upon Mac’s back, and accompanied by a minyan-and-a-halfsworth of davening Israeli political and religious flacks. The whole creepy spectacle surrounded and made possible by a thousand armed-to-the-teeth ID’ers. Thus Mac gropes the ancient stones, attempting to look reverential, but resembling more a glaze-eyed, venerable, and somewhat humaniform rabbit. Created and blinded perhaps in some black-hearted genetic-cosmetic experiment?

And lo, the temple’s wall remains backed up by the full power of the Fed. But the West Bank, is it FDIC insured?

Whilst on the most beautiful dawning in Darktown, the spring clouds unwind like a dragon stretching after its winter’s sleep, except that there has been no hibernation, the change has been active all along – it’s just shape-shifted to a form that from where you stand, appears new.

Towering flames, three times longer than the earth is wide. Three of these on the sun today. Prominence promenade.

Loot a burning building.

Daddy's a doornail.

Purim.

Long, hot spring.

Mysteries, mysteries.

In the *Pest*, a photo of Ashley Dupre, torso bare, hands lightly covering her breasts. The demureness of the gesture is undercut by her direct, almost challenging expression – eyes narrowed, head slightly tilted – there's something of Clint Eastwood-as-Dirty-Harryish in the appraising stare she fixes on the camera, and by extension, you. So compelling a face you scarcely notice her body, but then, as you're about to flip the page and read Crudele's take on the economy, you notice that she's got some lettering and maybe a symbol tattooed on her belly, maybe five inches below her navel, just north of where the editor cropped the photo. Whatever's writ there lies in shadow, and so you take off your glasses and get really close, hoping myopia helps you decode these hieroglyphs. But no, the printing's muddied and the lettering's done in some kind of heavy metal-style Fraktur script. It don't say *Semper Fi*, that's for sure, though it could be something Latin.

Fuggedaboutit. Hmm, there's a small, dagger-shaped tattoo on her right hand too. Give the lettering on A.D.'s girdle another try. Best you can make out is something like "tutefa vafui." Vafui sounds like "fuck off" in Sid Ceasar Sicilian. But Google that word combo and you get nowhere. Any more than you do by searching the web for a higher res version of the same pic, or another shot where the message is clearer.

OK, what if what look like “f”s are actually ornamental “l”s? Type that in and hit return. Aha! Loads of speculations, some more plausible than others – one translation offered is “fair value” – but the most reliable-sounding interpretation comes from an unidentified soul at Yahoo Answer responding to someone who asked precisely your question:

“*valui* = 1st person singular, perfect indicative active of ‘*valere*’ (to be healthy/well/strong).

“*tutela* = nominative or ablative singular of ‘*tutela*’ (guardianship or protector, as context dictates).

“Thus, if *tutela* is indeed ablative, the sentence could be translated: ‘I have been well thanks to/because of/by means of my protector.’

“Again, context would dictate the precise meaning, but there is no context here. I have supplied ‘my’ in order for the sentence to make a little more sense in English.”

Or else she could just be telling *Tutela* to fuck off in Sid Caesar Sicilian.

Missouri’s a swamp now. Back to the old days – positively antediluvian. Pterodactyls and all. Big snow’s on the way mañana. At least thirteen deaths so far. No *tutela valui* for the heartland any more than Darktown gets, or the Lower Nine.



Mark Schiefelbein/Associated Press

Near Rogersville, MO, yesterday.

Then there's the symbol, whatever it is, to the left of *valui* on A.D.'s lower abdomen. Maybe a butterfly or stylized eagle. If the latter, perhaps appropriated from the New York State Seal. Whatever it is seems to possess symmetrical wings. Well, that creature, if creature it be, will stay a mystery, at least for now. An itty-bitsy unknown nugget within the great ¿Por qué?