

16 JANUARY 2022

The Observer Magazine

Noises off: saving
our quiet places
Peter Crouch on
romance and
dancing like a robot
Rhubarb, rhubarb,
rhubarb with
Nigel Slater

Rylan's return

After dazzling us in X Factor and Gogglebox, Rylan Clark disappeared. In a deeply candid interview he tells us why

Ribblehead Viaduct, Yorkshire

January ~~Blues~~ Hues



Watercolour Challenge with Fern Britton

Weekdays 4pm



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The Observer Magazine



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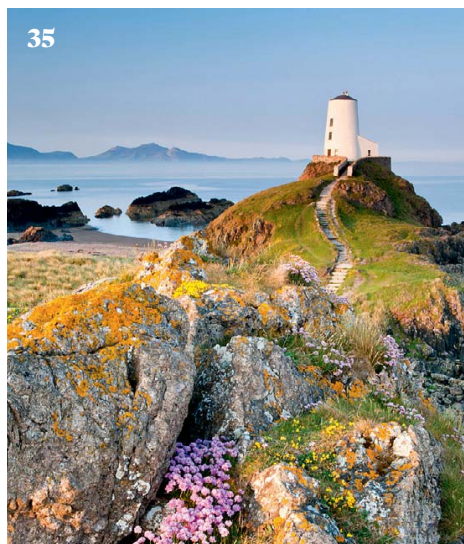
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Louise Roddon has been travelling and writing for most of her working career. Winner of many travel awards, and shortlisted for the British Press Awards, she is happiest when exploring off-radar destinations. Here, she suggests 10 great UK guided walks (p35).



Having been a stylist in the fashion industry for 15 years, **Hope Lawrie** particularly loves the collaborative nature of magazine shoots, seeing all the moving parts come together in print – as she did for our cover story this week (p8). When not styling, she is an obsessive eBay stalker, filling her home with (useless) miniature wine glasses and vintage lamps.

Tanya Frank writes on the intersection of motherhood, psychosis and immigration. Her debut book, *Zig Zag Boy: Motherhood, Madness and Letting Go*, due to be published next year, developed from an essay in the *New York Times* about her work as a volunteer at a seal sanctuary in California. This week, she reveals why she has taken up cycling (p36).



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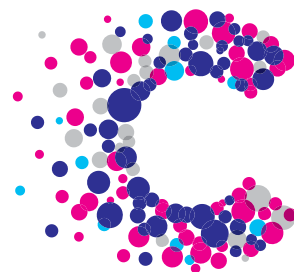
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Eva Wiseman

Being ill is no fun, especially if you don't even have Covid...



🐦 @evawiseman



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

Alan Road reported on the return visit to Britain of the 'graceful dancers of Korea', having been a big hit in 1972 ('East Side Story: Korea Brings on the Dancing Girls', 4 September 1977) in an early example of its soft power, long before K-pop.

The 45-strong National Dance Company had appeared in 50 other countries. Tongue in cheek, Road described them as 'a Korean export that should meet with no tariff barriers in Europe'.

'The posy of beautiful girls seen in Seoul's Kyung-Bok Palace are releasing a flower dance for London audiences,' he wrote. 'With their feet hidden by long dresses they seem to glide across the stage in undulating ripples like colourful caterpillars.'

This was very much the traditional side of a rapidly changing country. 'Traditional music is provided by flutes, drums like hour-glasses, a kind of harp that is a veritable cat's cradle of strings and an instrument that sounds like someone

opening and closing a door with a rusty hinge.' Perhaps tariffs had prevented the export of WD-40 to Korea.

Underneath all that polish lies years of hard work. Dancers began training from the age of six and would go on to study 'the centuries-old mysteries of the three traditional forms – the court, religious and folk dances'.

The performers at Sadler's Wells had been rehearsing for five months. 'Even in a practice room like a huge warehouse, where the temperature is in the high 80s and the taped music is inclined to hiccup, the graceful performers generate a certain magic with their hypnotic movements,' wrote an enchanted Road.

'European audiences may not catch the significance of every side-long flashing glance or the sadness in the outstretched fingertips,' he concluded, 'but the sheer beauty of the girls, the colour of their traditional costumes and the vitality of their dancing should not go unappreciated.' **Chris Hall**

In December my daughter brought Covid home from school as if a folded permission slip. The feeling, on seeing the two pink lines come up on her test, was complicated and raw, containing both bad memories and relief. Finally (a part of me thought, a part of me quite low down and bloodied), finally the thing we have been waiting for has arrived. I breathed out a breath I had been holding for two years.

There were six or seven other feelings, too, including a now-familiar sense of doom brought on by the realisation that for us, lockdown was to begin again. A gentle PTSD crawled in and made itself comfortable on my lap as I briefly mapped out the next two months of arguments and pasta in my mind. Of course, with rude inevitability, the virus took its time spreading through the house, lingering on our daughter, only taking up residence with our boy toddler when her isolation was nearing its end. He stopped sleeping, his temperature leaping up and down like a cat when the doorbell goes.

Mid-way through our son's isolation my partner looked at me and regretfully said, "I feel odd." He had it, I did not, on we went, greyly. On Christmas Day, having tested relentlessly, I took the children to my parents' house where the five of us had a token celebration, but at some point after the crackers I started to feel not good. By the time I got home I was feverish and slightly wild, my throat swollen, my mood vile. Had a faulty test meant I'd put my parents at risk? I went to bed.

I'm used to pain. I can deal with migraines, even those that are clattery and awful or must be taken personally. I'm used to grimly carrying on, one eye shut. But I'm unaccustomed to illness like this, where, wheezing and achy, I have no choice but to pass over all caregiving duties in order to lie down and doze through the new series of *Sex and the City*, on which I formed many sharp yet neurologically suspect opinions.

I slept for days, getting up only to eat muesli and do lateral flow tests, all negative. The lack of a positive result made me feel a little mad, as if I had somehow slipped through reality's fine gauze to another timeline where Wuhan's animal market had been closed that day.

That week I'd been reading Hanya Yanagihara's new novel, *To Paradise*, the final third of which is set in New York at the end of the 21st century, a place where increasingly deadly pandemics have ushered in totalitarianism.

It was a bad time, I see now, to read a story about a future defined by sickness, to read about sterilisation, state surveillance, where a mother isolates her immuno-compromised twins for their entire life as yet another virus threatens their society, and how, when she catches it, leaving them without care, the two boys leave their compound for the first time and die in the garden, "their lives becoming glorious – for once – even as they ended".

A bad time. Lying in the linen darkness of a winter afternoon while the government blustered its way through unprecedented levels of Covid infections and

my baby coughed downstairs. A bad time, Hanya!

When my second PCR test came back negative, too, I left the house, shakily but with intent. If I wasn't going to have Covid then I sure as hell wasn't going to stay inside that germ-thick house one second longer. I didn't last long; outside there was mostly mud. When I got back to bed I read about a case of "flurona", a rare new double infection of coronavirus and influenza that's been discovered in a young, pregnant, unvaccinated Israeli woman. "Lol," I croaked, to nobody.

I'm much better now, thank you for asking. My cough, while rancid, no longer rattles the cutlery, and my limbs, while still aching, are now entirely capable of navigating at least a staircase. My mood, though, remains in limbo, vigilant to the slightest interior shift.

It's a strange feeling to be ill with the wrong thing. To live in a state immersed in a single virus – a sickness that provokes outrage and dry coughs, and shuts down schools and burns out the NHS, and inspires protestors to storm testing centres in a selection of quite bad jeans – but to be struck down by another one altogether, one with similar symptoms but fewer culture wars.

Here I found the modern version of Fomo, less bothered by smoky parties and the potential of sex, more concerned with missing out on the hottest new variant, especially when the rest of your family are now happily immune for at least a fortnight.

Why did everyone else in the house get it and not me, I mutter into a tissue – had I been such a bad wife and mother that I hadn't been within their breathing spaces all month? What was the point of the night sweats, the hacking cough, the headaches and breathlessness if not to have been a brave little soldier and survived a pandemic? Honestly. ■

One more thing...

To return, for a second, to the *Sex and the City* reboot, *And Just Like That*, am I the only one struck by the fact that the characters appear to have been asleep for the entire 17 years we weren't watching? Don't they seem perpetually startled by time having passed? Their bodies having aged, politics having shifted, podcasts existing?

After **Joan Didion's** death I returned to her personal cookbook, the most revealing page of which contained a recipe for parsley salad. It was interesting not just as an illustration of her diet, but as an insight into her social reach: the recipe feeds up to 40.

'Children are a crushing responsibility,' says Olivia Colman's Leda brightly to a pregnant woman, in **The Lost Daughter**. It was the scene when Leda refused to kiss her daughter's bleeding finger, so angry was she at being ripped from her desk to tend it, that my partner left the room in discomfort. Me, I loved it.

Tower Bridge, London

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This much I know

Peter Crouch, footballer, 40

Interview **MARK BAILEY**
Photograph **DAVID TITLOW**

My first love was Italian football. It was so flamboyant. Gianluca Vialli was my idol; he had this effortless style. I was also transfixed by the *Football Italia* show on Channel 4, James Richardson sitting by a swimming pool with his pink *Gazzetta dello Sport* and his tiny little cup. I said to Dad, "Why is his cup so small?" He had to explain it was an espresso, not a tiny cup of bog-standard tea.

I can be romantic. When I proposed to Ab [Abbey Clancy, Crouch's wife] in a villa in Ibiza I set up candles all the way downstairs so she could follow them to me. I once whisked her away for a weekend in Paris and surprised her with a new outfit each night. Not all of it was perfect, but I tried my best. When I played football I used to write little poems for

her and leave them around the house. I should still do that really.

I was very apprehensive about fatherhood. You just don't know if you'll be any good. Babies weren't a huge thing in my family. I have four kids now, I can safely say I'm quite good.

Maybe football fans liked me because I'm one of them. Some players get caught up in their own hype. But I knew I was lucky. I enjoyed myself, people could relate to that. Some players don't even smile when they score. I find that difficult to understand.

I first did my robot dance at David Beckham's house party before the 2006 World Cup. After a few drinks I thought, "I'll do something stupid on the way to the toilet." I didn't know the camera got me. I shat myself when I saw it had been

filmed. The lads were saying I should do the dance next time I scored. So I did.

I'm the most political I've ever been. I recently had a meeting with Tracey Crouch, the former Sports Minister, and Prince William about the plight of non-league football, whose finances have been crippled by Covid. It's so unfair. I joined Dulwich Hamlet as a 17-year-old and it opened my eyes to real football. This was

I first did my robot dance after a few drinks at David Beckham's house party before the 2006 World Cup

people's lives. A win mattered. Finances were hard. I'm a director there now, I've gone full circle. These clubs need help.

I worry about getting dementia. As a tall player [6ft 7in], I headed more balls than anyone in Europe for five or six years, so if anyone is going to struggle, it will be me. As a kid I used to practise heading until I saw stars. Today, I would never do that with my children.

My greatest achievement was changing people's opinions of me. I was very different to a lot of footballers, so I got a lot of stick. The tall gags got a bit tiresome. And the terraces aren't kind to a young, skinny 18-year-old lad. But to overcome all that and play for England meant I'd proved myself. ■

Peter Crouch: Save Our Beautiful Game is available on discovery+ now

'I started off as a joke':
Rylan wears turquoise
knit by erdem.com.
Facing page: suit, shirt
and shoes by gucci.com

'I'm finding a new me'



After bursting on to our screens on *X Factor* a decade ago, Rylan Clark soon earned the status of ‘national treasure’. But last year, the TV personality disappeared, leaving worried friends and fans in the dark. Here, for the first time, he tells Eva Wiseman about his vertiginous rise to fame, his breakdown and recovery – and why he will always, always love Barbara Windsor

Photographs GUSTAVO PAPALEO
Stylist HOPE LAWRIE

At the end of 2021, Rylan had his teeth knocked out. During two operations under general anaesthetic, then a third under local, his teeth, £25,000 veneers which had become both a trademark and a punchline, were hammered, then chiselled away. “New teeth,” he smiles, his grin now modest, “New hair, new start,” and then he frowns, “New me.”

Neither of us were expecting the interview to go like this. Rylan (born Ross Clark in east London – his mother moved the family to Essex after homophobic bullies fractured his skull when he was in his early teens) was intending to talk about his charming new podcast, *Ry-Union*, his latest project in a series of jolly presenting gigs that began after his appearance on *X Factor* 10 years ago and really never stopped. “I started off as the joke,” he glitters, “and I’m still laughing.” We were expecting a hoot, is what I mean. We were expecting to chuckle through stories of his unlikely stardom, the cosy place he holds in the heart of the British public, the way he ascended from comedy figure to national treasure over the course of a decade, but he’s had a very bad, no-good year, and though he was not expecting to talk about it, having not yet explained

its depths to most of his friends, suddenly there we are.

But first, an introduction, for readers unfamiliar with *Big Brother* or his Radio 2 show or *Gogglebox*, or his used-car adverts on telly that recently provoked an outraged stranger to tweet the car dealer, “I will never buy a car from you whilst that complete buck tooth ignoramus @Rylan is advertising your company! Illiterate, talentless, council nobody!” and Rylan to reply, “THEN WALK, MATE.” His early career plan was to “get famous”, and it’s almost despite this that Rylan, now 33, has become the star he is today. In 2012 he was a joke contestant on *X Factor*, destined surely for a life having beer thrown at him at club appearances just outside the M25 – at the end of that year he and Jimmy Savile were battling for bad press, with death threats leading to 24-hour security.

But the public grew to adore him, seeing a brightness, wit and authenticity beneath the tan. “The first six months of my career,” he says, explaining why he’s always got time for fans wielding cameras, “were a public vote.” In 2014, after winning *Celebrity Big Brother*, he appeared in Grayson Perry’s Channel 4 series on identity, and Perry tells me that he still has a “great affection” for Rylan. When they met, says Perry, “He was going through a rapid, very 21st-century transition to fame. I describe him as looking like a ‘computer-generated Tudor nobleman’ but in stark contrast his personality >



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'I'm good at being Rylan': (from left) with Madonna; on X Factor with Dermot O'Leary, and on stage at the live results show in 2012; with ex Dan Neal; and with his mum on Celebrity Gogglebox

► is a very warm Essex man of the people." As they walked through a shopping centre together, mothers handed him their babies for photos. He's easy and funny, Perry adds, and crucially, "aware of his own ridiculousness".

It was this self-awareness that led to Ross creating Rylan, his professional persona – "which I think was the healthiest thing I ever chose to do," he nods. He's wearing a tracksuit so white it's almost blue, and a black cap that he adjusts at times of unease. "It's how I actually got through all the shit in the beginning, because I was like, it's fine – they're talking about Rylan. They're not talking about Ross. Ross sits in tracksuits and watches reruns of *Keeping Up Appearances*." And Rylan? "Rylan is always smiling." And then our conversation shifts.

Last summer Rylan split up with Dan, his husband of six years, an ex-*Big Brother* contestant he met while interviewing him post-eviction. Soon after their split it was announced that Rylan would be taking some time off his presenting duties, and he went quiet for four months. "I'd got to the point where I didn't know if I wanted to come back. Or whether I would be able to do this job again. I'd got... quite ill," he says, cautiously. He stopped eating. "I went down to just over 9st and I'm 6ft 4in. It got bad. Like, very bad. And I didn't think it would get better. I needed help." He pauses.

Believe it or not, he says, "I'm very private, really, and I want to remain that way. But there were points then when it was like Where's Wally, people flying drones over my house asking, 'Where the fuck is he?' They knew something was really wrong when I didn't turn up to present *Eurovision*!" A dark laugh. He loves *Eurovision*. "Everyone feels like I'm their mate. I was probably talking to five million people a night. But last summer for the first time, I literally felt alone." He leans in. "I've always been strong. I've always taken a lot of shit. And this is where Rylan and Ross come into play. Because when it's Rylan I'm a brick wall. You can take the piss out of my teeth, call me a cunt, and I'll just go, that's fine. This is what I get paid for. But when it's Ross, I don't deal with that well. And when you find out something you always wanted isn't what you thought it was..." He shakes his head as if confused. "I didn't think I'd be here. I didn't think I could continue." Could continue to work, I ask, or to live? "Both. I didn't think I'd actually come back. I was very... gone."

He looks surprised to be sharing this, and a little embarrassed, too, because this is not the Rylan brand fans have come to know – the cheeky jokes, the laughing it off, the silver linings found at the bottom of a crisp packet. "I'm the last person that my friends would ever believe could feel as low as I did. Superficially, on paper, I can look after myself, but actually in that moment and for months after, none of the money or the fame mattered. I did not know myself at certain points. I was having thoughts and doing things that made me... fucked up, for want of a better word. I didn't understand why I was doing that to myself. So, I went away for a bit." To hospital? "Yes. For safety reasons." He coughs gently. "It's really strange talking about this, because I've not even spoken about it to my friends. I just never thought I could get that ill."

The trigger was the divorce, but he's realising now that there was more to his breakdown, that alongside his success, something else had been building. The space between his two lives had become swampish, hungry. His identity was wobbling. "It's 10 years that I've been doing this job. And I think that whole decade slapped me around the arse and stabbed me in the stomach. Maybe I needed it to happen. I just wish it hadn't happened as hard as it did." He holds eye contact, and we sit for a second. "I think I'm finding a new 'me' now. I'm so good at being Rylan. I know my job – what's right, what's wrong, what works, what doesn't – I do Rylan really well. But actually, I didn't realise how much Ross I'd lost."

What did he learn in hospital? "That I always say yes to everything and I nod and smile. But now if there's something I really don't want to do, I'm going to say no. I've learned to be more in control. I've not had control for so long, I feel like Britney!" Why hasn't he had control? "Because my life was really my job. I feel like I lost a lot of me. I've learned that fame is something that I wanted, but not necessarily the thing I want still. And don't get me wrong, it's always lovely meeting people and being treated certain ways. But sometimes it's important to stand in the queue. Sometimes you want to just fuck off over the garden centre to buy a plant."

As somebody who has looked at fame from inside and out, reaching for it, enjoying its frillier thrills, it's fitting that he's choosing to question it, too. An ex-reality TV star who still talks about *Big Brother* with affectionate reverence ("That show was like my baby. And as much as I love working on everything I've done since, I don't think I'll ever find that bubble again,") he holds a unique position on primetime TV, a kind of expert witness. After the deaths of former *Love Island* contestants, "I was asked a lot about my views on aftercare in reality TV," he says, "But I was the worst person to ask, because for me it never stopped. I was never in that position where I had to go back to work in a shop. But this year, all of my employers were brilliant. And when I say I disappeared, I literally disappeared. I think they knew how bad I was." There were reports he'd been crying during songs while presenting his Radio 2 show. "There were a select few people that needed to know that I was a danger to myself."

Behind him, shuffling through her bag, his makeup artist and best friend Bernice is trying not to cry. "Strange situations do very strange things to people. If it wasn't for my mum, and my family and close friends I genuinely have no idea if I'd be here." He is shocking himself with every sentence, his hat coming off and going back on, his cigarette smoking itself. "I learned I'm worth something. That I should be proud of myself, not embarrassed of Rylan. I should be

proud that I can build my mum a house. I should be proud that I can employ my family. I learned that." He hurries away the beginnings of a tear with his hand. "Oof, sorry. Anyway!"

A few weeks after he'd come off *X Factor*, Rylan was in Selfridges buying pants when he heard someone call his name. Turning round, he saw Barbara Windsor. They'd met in a green room a month earlier, and they greeted each other with appropriate delight. "Then she introduced me to her husband and I was like, 'Hello, Scott. Lovely to meet you!' She said, 'No, darling. You said hello to him a few weeks back at *X Factor*'. I was so sorry. Like, all over the place. And she said, 'Let me give you the best piece of advice you'll ever need. Never say, 'Nice to meet you.' It's always, 'Lovely to see you.'" And for the past 10 years, Barbara Windsor has got me out of so many awkward scrapes. If she was still with us today I would give her the biggest kiss. Meeting Madonna, Britney, pah, they just pale in comparison."

Jo Brand, though, he liked her. A few weeks before we speak she had presented *Have I Got News For You*, and it was Rylan's first time as a panellist. He was a hit, inviting Brand to Ibiza, teasing Ian Hislop about hanging around Essex. "I've said it before and I'll say it again," tweeted radio presenter James O'Brien that night. "Rylan is a huge talent. A born storyteller with exceptional comic timing and a beautifully rare streak of self-awareness." And someone, too, it was clear, who is deeply engaged with politics. "You know," he cackles elegantly, "whenever I talk about politics publicly, you'll get

all the idiots going, 'What the fuck does he know, *X Factor* reject?' But it's probably a lot more than they do."

In the past he's admitted his love of Prime Minister's Questions and obsession with the horrors of Brexit. "I need to be careful because I work for the BBC and someone might shoot me," he says, "but I feel our country needs to be run by people that live in this world. It's very opinionated to say, but I think it's time for party-less politics, don't you? I think it's time for one government to run this country and for politicians to start working together, rather than sitting there like children and having rows in the House of Commons. I just think it's ridiculous."

Could he see himself getting into politics? "If I weren't Rylan, maybe!" Might Rylan stop at some point? Might he make way for Ross, and a slower life, and a still dimmer smile? "If I did, then yes – that's something that I'd love to get into. Rylan for PM!" He grins. "But come on, really, would you vote for me?" In a heartbeat. ■

Listen to Ry-Union on all podcast platforms. Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123



Invested in doing good

The world of responsible investing can seem daunting – so, to help you make informed choices, we've produced a guide to the dilemmas, jargon and key debates

There is a reason so many discussions about tackling the climate crisis have become discussions about finance, investments and pensions. The global effort to avert the most catastrophic effects of global heating is in one sense an emergency mission to reallocate financial resources. This has prompted a fundamental shift in the world of investing.

Your pension savings and other investments may well be supporting businesses that can make a big difference to the global climate effort – whether through their actions or their inaction. Likewise, those businesses are also key to addressing other social issues, such as growing inequality and a lack of diversity. Your money can influence the direction these companies take. After all, businesses are answerable to their shareholders and investors.

However, being a responsible investor is arguably very different from being a responsible consumer. When you swap out items in your shopping basket for more ethical or eco-friendly substitutes, you already know the difference between, say, laundry detergent and fabric conditioner.

The same might not apply to investing, particularly if you're a novice. More importantly, unlike ethical consumerism, responsible investing isn't always as straightforward as substituting items in your shopping basket for more sustainable alternatives. That's because investors can exert influence on companies in different ways – and are therefore faced with different considerations and questions.

So, to make the world of responsible investing easier to navigate, we've produced an online guide exploring the issues, the dilemmas, the jargon and the watchouts. The aim is to help you to become as savvy at responsible investing as you are at responsible shopping.

Here's an overview of some of the issues explored in the online guide:

THE NEW LANGUAGE

A shift towards valuing companies against their impact on the planet and people, rather than valuing them solely against their profits, has introduced new words and acronyms to the world of investing.

For instance, investors and pension holders are paying increasing attention to how companies perform against so-called ESG criteria, which stands for environmental, social and governance. Other acronyms refer to different types of ESG targets, standards and disclosures. But there's no need to be put off, thanks to our handy guide.

GUARDING AGAINST GREENWASHING

Vague and imprecise language can leave room for misleading or unsubstantiated claims about a company's climate credentials – otherwise known as greenwashing. For instance, what do words such as "green" and "eco" actually mean?

Corporate greenwashing can make it more difficult for people to make informed decisions. It also undermines genuine efforts by companies to clean up their acts and tackle the climate crisis. So, whether you're a consumer or an investor, the ability to call out corporate greenwashing is fast becoming a key life skill. Our online guide therefore examines how investors can guard against it.



DIVESTMENT OR ENGAGEMENT?

This has become a key dilemma. Should responsible investors sell their stakes in companies that fall short on ethical or environmental issues, or should they instead retain their holdings and use their position as shareholders to influence those companies that need to do better? The debate is often couched as the “divestment versus engagement” dilemma, and there are strong feelings on either side.

One problem with divesting is that there will likely be less-scrupulous investors out there happy to step in. “Ditching and switching” can therefore all too often entail offloading polluting operations to less-accountable or responsible owners. Divesting from heavily polluting companies can also make it harder for them to raise funds to finance their transition to cleaner ways of operating.

Retaining an investment means retaining a seat at the table, which allows investors to put pressure on boardrooms to change. This can often lead to more effective results. We explore why it’s useful to move beyond the divestment versus engagement dichotomy and instead view divestment as a threat of last resort that can strengthen shareholders’ position when engaging with companies.

THE ART OF INFLUENCING

So how exactly can investors persuade a company to reduce its carbon footprint or tackle the mistreatment of workers in its supply chain? From gently nudging to headline-grabbing public confrontations, we explore how shareholders can put pressure on companies to step up.

Engagement can be undertaken by individual investors and pension holders, or by shareholder action groups. But it can carry even more weight when undertaken by asset managers who work for pension and investment firms. These asset managers

Investors are paying increasing attention to how companies perform against ESG criteria

invest and manage investment funds on behalf of individuals, pooling their resources, and so they typically control much larger stakes in each company they invest in.

Shareholder engagement can require a great deal of perseverance and expertise. In the online guide, we ask several asset managers how they go about it, and how their roles have changed as a result of the industry’s shift to more responsible investing.

SCALE AND IMPACT

It can be tempting to focus on smaller startups that offer exciting solutions to sustainability issues. They may well be deserving of investment, but it’s worth considering that while larger, more established companies may be less exciting, their actions can potentially be more impactful thanks to their market clout.

Shareholder engagement with them to accelerate their shift to greener, fairer ways of operating can often have an outsized impact on wider global efforts by dint of their scale and the size of their supply chains. Put

simply, they have more room to improve. They may also have a greater imperative to do so, given that they will likely be more exposed to the financial fallout of the climate crisis, as well as to future regulations and the prospect of reputational damage.

This illustrates how, for businesses and investors alike, the financial case for responsible investment and the moral case have become increasingly linked.

Find out more about these and other issues to consider when it comes to responsible investing by heading to theguardian.com/the-invested-generation

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Are we at breaking point?

Two years of Covid have wreaked havoc with the nation's mental health. What can be learned from the survivors of other traumas and is there a way of thinking ourselves to a happier, healthier place?

Words **REBECCA SEAL**
Photograph **KRISTINA VARAKSINA**

It was October 2020 when I realised I was going to have to ask for help. I've always been anxious, but thanks to the pandemic, I developed debilitating health anxiety. A dire winter was coming and any respite we'd had over the summer felt like it was slipping away. I couldn't get to sleep and when I finally did, I had nightmares. My stomach churned and my hands shook so badly I had to give up caffeine. I developed a chronic reflux cough and, on more than one occasion, got into such an irrational spiral about it being Covid that I had to book a PCR test just to be able to function.

"One of the most diabolical things about this pandemic is the on and on-ness of it all," says Amanda Ripley, author of *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – and Why*. "Humans can withstand a lot of turmoil and instability if they can recover." Prior to Covid, Ripley studied people who survived tornadoes and terror attacks, emergencies for which the mental health consequences are much better understood than the long, slow-burn, seemingly endless one we find ourselves living through.

As Ripley knows, this is not the first disaster humans have had to live through, so are there things we can learn from other disasters about what they do to our brains, relationships and communities? And, more importantly, how to make things better?

"There's a tremendous amount we can learn from how we've responded to previous emergencies," say Dr Brandon Kohrt, professor of psychiatry at George Washington University, who works in Liberia, Uganda and Nepal, dealing with the mental health aftermath of everything from Ebola to earthquakes. "Many low- and middle-income

countries, like South Africa, India and Uganda, immediately rolled out mental health and psychosocial plans in February, March and April 2020. They had experienced prior disasters, but these approaches could be just as beneficial in high-resource places like the US and UK," he tells me, and I can't help wondering, do we in the Global North think of ourselves with such superiority that we find it hard to learn from the experiences of the Global South?

"With population-wide trauma, a war or a terrorist attack, we heal socially," says Kohrt. "Being together when the awful thing happens and then healing together is really crucial. People who come together in that healing process tend to do better than those who either self-isolate as a response to distress or are ostracised. So I think what's happened with Covid is that although the stress isn't necessarily as acute or sudden as an earthquake or an explosion, the isolation we all experienced in the context of stress and trauma is eating away at us psychologically."

Not everyone who experiences a disaster will develop a mental health problem: people survive trauma well all the time, but "between 5 and 10% of people who've been through traumatic events such as a terrorist attack will go on to develop clinical levels of PTSD," says Dr Sarita Robinson, who studies the psychobiology of survival at the University of Central Lancashire.

Around one in five people who experience a humanitarian emergency will go on to develop a mental health problem (prevalence of common mental health problems in the global population is about 1 in 10), and rates of serious mental health disorders, such as schizophrenia, increase from 2-3% to 3-4%. "Research from 2018 suggested mental health problems double in emergency >

Get me out of here: Rebecca Seal discovers there is a lot we can learn from how we've responded to previous emergencies

loaf



OUR LITTLE SALE HAS LANDED

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► settings. I wouldn't be surprised if that turned out to be the result of the pandemic, too," says Ashley Nemiro, senior adviser for the global Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Network, which helps people working in crises.

The psychological challenges of Covid are huge, but many practitioners feel they aren't being addressed at all. Willem van de Put is co-founder of the Mental Health in Complex Emergencies course. "Covid has made things worse and, to the chagrin of leaders in global mental health, everybody is saying we should do something but, basically, absolutely nothing is happening. Governments are not willing to address it." Investment in mental health is so low that, as Nemiro puts it: "Every country is a developing country when it comes to mental health services."

Research this year by the Centre for Mental Health, a think tank, suggests that 8 million British adults and 1.5 million children will need mental health support in the next 10 years as a direct result of the pandemic. Office for National Statistics data already shows rates of depression doubling since the pandemic began, but it isn't being evenly felt, says Leila Reyburn of mental health charity Mind. "The people who've been impacted the most and are continuing to feel that impact are people who had pre-existing mental health problems, people of colour, those living in deprivation and young people."

"In the UK, we have a system based on late intervention and crisis response," says Andy Bell from the Centre for Mental Health. "Only a third of people with common mental health problems get support. We don't offer it quickly and we tend to wait until people's needs are so severe that they need specialised treatment."

But work by Kohrt and colleagues shows that early intervention is effective, especially for common mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety – and that it doesn't always have to be carried out by highly trained professionals. He implements a community-level post-emergency support programme called Problem Management Plus, first developed by the World Health Organization in Pakistan and Kenya in 2015, which he then successfully trialled in Nepal (with similar programmes now running all over the middle- and lower-income world).

Through the programme, anyone with a high-school education can be trained in just a few weeks to deliver psychological support to those who need it, often embedded in places where people seek help for problems with housing or employment, rather than specifically for mental health. Clients get five weekly 90-minute sessions, usually one-to-one, or longer sessions in a small group, and are taught stress-management skills, breath control, problem solving, how to overcome inertia and how to develop a social support network. The final session is about how not to relapse.

"We're taking interventions that were developed for earthquakes, floods or war, which we've used for years, and using them in New York City right now," Kohrt says. "It doesn't have to be by psychiatrists or psychologists in a specialised clinical location."

Similar early intervention projects do exist in the UK, but they're few and far between. A coalition of charities, including the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, Mind, YoungMinds and the Children's Society, is currently trying to push government to "Fund the Hubs" and create a network of informal community support centres for children and young people, to which they can self refer. One such hub, the Nest, is already up and running in the London borough of Southwark – and 78% of its users say their wellbeing has improved.

This won't shock you, but the ongoing nature of the pandemic really isn't good for us. "Our brains operate in a very different way when they experience prolonged threats: you're constantly on edge and alert, and that shrinks our ability to empathise with others," says Kohrt. "We become



much more focused on a very tight-knit group, and everybody else seems a threat. What's most challenging about the pandemic is that even family members became threats – especially pre-vaccines. If kids are going to be a threat to their grandparents' health or vice-versa, suddenly we're on alert even with people who should be helping us." This disrupts our ability to be empathetic in general. "We become more prejudiced, we become more stigmatising, we become more discriminating."

Some of us may find it harder to regulate our emotions, too, says Kohrt, something I can identify with. "We call it 'self-regulation', but it's always a mix of self-regulation and regulation with others. We've evolved to constantly regulate our emotions with our peers." But even if you were locked down with your family, that might not have helped. "Family units are connected to many other people as well, and if they don't have contact with extended family, friends, peers, then that family's own emotional regulation gets disrupted."

"In humanitarian emergencies, one of the biggest things we do is make sure people have a sense of control and agency," says Nemiro. "Often that is taken away when their social fabric is destroyed – and the pandemic did the same thing." While schools, churches and community centres weren't reduced to rubble, they became so hard to access that they might as well have vanished. "Lack of social connection, lack of community and feeling out of control all break down mental health," says Nemiro.

"The first thing we need is to realise that we have to repair the social fabric," says Ripley. "People come to me all the time saying: 'We don't know what to do – our church, our school, our town is exploding with conflict.' There's so much pent-up frustration, alienation and sadness that has not been dealt with – we will find a target of convenience. After every disaster, there's a short golden hour of solidarity [rainbows in windows! Clap for carers!] followed by a deep valley of division. Repairing the social fabric needs to be an explicit mission."

Luckily, the repairs can be simple. "Say I'm a head teacher and I'm going to have parents come to an event. Afterwards, I don't just let everybody go – these are opportunities for connection and we are in a deficit situation

– so I serve drinks and snacks outside for half an hour." So is the casual socialising that we previously thought so little of – the school plays, the church fêtes – more important than we noticed at the time? "Those things are not just pleasant and fun: they're investments in your future sanity and wellbeing. The way you build community resilience is through knowing each other so that we don't assume the worst, so that it gets a little harder to demonise each other, and that prepares us for the next disaster," says Ripley.

Bruce Daisley, former VP of Twitter, has written a book about resilience, *Fortitude*. "Police and firefighters who were in the thick of the events of 9/11 have been well researched and generally the closer they report being to their colleagues, the better protection to their mental health they felt," he says. "Resilience is social strength, and social connectedness helps us recover better from operations, prevents us from falling into depression and generally improves wellbeing."

'One of the most diabolical things about this pandemic is the on and on-ness of it all': (from top) author Amanda Ripley; and Dr Sarita Robinson

"A huge part of emotional regulation requires positive interactions with others, including touch – if you look at other species, the way that that's done is through grooming and other non-sexual touch

among group members. We've had so little opportunity for that," says Kohrt. Connecting when we're in distress is even more powerful. "If I'm not the one in distress, I can help you regulate your distress," he says. "There's a feedback loop between the helper and the helpee with neurobiological changes that are health-promoting for both, to the point where helping others probably reduces our inflammatory responses and improves our antiviral responses."

If we remain in Ripley's valley of division, though, then "we're vulnerable to conflict entrepreneurs," she says. "It is incredibly easy to turn us against each other, whether you're a politician, pundit or social-media platform. We need to know that and remind ourselves that we don't want to be played this way. We're not going to be chumps."

One way to offset that particular danger as well as helping us to cope with the aftermath of an emergency is to deliberately tell ourselves a story of the experience which allows us to have agency within it. "Reappraisal is one of the main ways we manage our emotions as humans, and it's probably one of the most sophisticated tricks of the mind," says Ripley. "Are there stories we can tell ourselves that are true, but also leave us some hope? Yes there has been real suffering and hardship, but maybe you or your child showed remarkable resilience in finding a way to adapt or to be with that loss and still create new things."

Ripley suggests spending 15 minutes writing your own story of the pandemic, but as though you were a benign third party, observing (you can also do this with kids). "With writing there's a kind of organisation of the experience that happens in the brain, that you don't have the space to do when you're in a disaster. Writing a story can create that space and since there's not enough space for recovery in this type of slow disaster, we have to create it."

Coincidentally, I recently tried something similar, inspired by an article by Daisy Dowling in the *Harvard Business Review*. Rather than a story, she encourages us to list our achievements throughout the pandemic – which could include not snapping all your child's pencils in an impotent rage while home-schooling, or cooking 654 dinners in a row since March 2020, as well as more traditional wins. It was an uplifting way to look back and reframe the shitshow of the last two years.

Does writing a story give the emergency a longed-for ending, too? "The brain wants an ending because the brain needs psychological certainty," says Ripley. "There is no end, but by repeatedly creating a narrative that has a conclusion maybe we could give it an end." ■

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We wouldn't condone litter in our parks and countryside, so why do we put up with sound pollution? Alex Moshakis meets the people tasked with 'saving quiet for the benefit of all life' and hears their stories

Photographs CAMERON KARSTEN
and BEN QUINTON

Silence is golden

Last month, I spent a cold morning wandering around Hampstead Heath, one of London's largest green spaces, with a sound designer named Nicholas Allan. For many, the Heath is an escape. There are almost 800 acres of it: meadows and woodland, hollows and springs, hills and ponds. It is big and important enough to have its own 12-person constabulary, which upholds the park's 47 bylaws, including restrictions on drone flying and car driving. Locals I know walk dogs in and out of old forests and along curling gravelly pathways. In summer, when the sun shines on the city, the park becomes so busy it seems to vibrate, festival-like. But for the rest of the year it remains mostly hushed.

In July, Allan awarded the Heath "Urban Quiet Park" status. He was acting on behalf of Quiet Parks International, or QPI, a non-profit based in Los Angeles that is "committed to saving quiet for the benefit of all life". QPI's purpose is to identify locations around the world that remain free from man-made noise for at least brief pockets of time. As humanity grows louder, these places are in danger of extinction, the organisation argues, even though they are integral to our wellbeing and the health of the natural world. Some of the locations already identified, like stretches of the Zabalo River in Ecuador, where quiet might linger for several consecutive hours, are in the wilderness. Remarkably,

others are in urban centres. The Heath, which QPI calls "a refuge from the noise of the city" that "has shown it provides the experience of being able to fully immerse oneself within the natural environment", is one of them.

Allan is QPI's man in London (he lives in Bristol – close enough), though "I still can't find my way around the park very well," he told me. We'd entered the Heath through a southern gate and were ambling up a hill, in no particular direction. When we met, we'd been surrounded by city noise, though it had been difficult to pinpoint exactly where each sound was coming from. "I think of it as a diffuse hum," Allan said. "A glowing blanket that just sits there, no discernible direction." I would have described it, less poetically, as a shit heap of sound. But a few hundred metres into the park the noise had dimmed so much we could identify individual notes between moments of near-silence: a helicopter in the distance, a passing conversation between dog walkers, the cries of young schoolchildren in red uniforms playing together in a grassy clearing. It was easier to talk, and to think; we could still see the city, but we couldn't hear it. "It's only when you go somewhere really quiet that you realise what was there before," Allan said.

These days, real quiet is difficult to come by. We're surrounded by noise almost constantly: the thrum of aeroplanes, the rush of roads, the dings of email and

'During lockdown you could suddenly hear into the distance': Nicholas Allan on London's Hampstead Heath, which is a 'refuge from the noise of the city'

smartphones. Listen now, wherever you are – what do you hear? For me: the whirring of a washing machine, the tip-tapping of laptop keys, my son's loud crashing and shouting, the brash clicks of a new computer mouse, the machine-sawing of wood in a neighbour's garden, the brief rise-and-fall roars of cars hurtling past the front of our home.

All of these sounds are common and intrusive and, if persistent, bad for our long-term health. Research has shown that if you live near a busy road you are more likely to develop high cortisol levels, to suffer from hypertension and heart disease, and to become overweight. In a 2012 study, it was estimated that up to 40 million adults in the US suffer from hearing impairment related to excessive noise exposure. The World Health Organization considers noise "one of the most important environmental risks to health." A 2018 report warned that 1.6m years of life are lost in western Europe as a result of exposure to road noise, which can contribute to other threatening health conditions: a lack of focus, sleep disturbance, a creeping reduction in quality of life.

This would be less worrying if the noises weren't >

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► getting louder. Before the pandemic, the aviation industry was skyrocketing – 4.5 billion passengers boarded flights in 2019, up from 1.5 billion in 1999. Car production continues at pace. Shipping traffic is also increasing. In 2020, the Metropolitan Police received 41,212 noise complaints, even though it doesn't really deal with noise complaints. We are able to recognise loud sounds – the shocking burp of a motorbike, a young child's yelp – as noticeably intrusive, but the effects of these moments in isolation don't always add up to much. What is more worrying, and often now so normalised as to be imperceptible, is the implacable din that soundtracks our daily lives, which can lead us unknowingly into ill health.

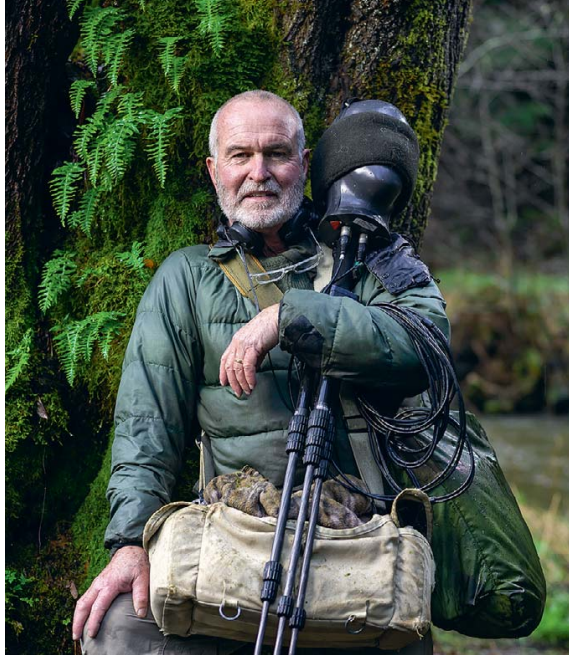
On the Heath, Allan and I continued walking, up over the crest of a hill, then along a path that began to curl to the right, where there was an area of woodland. Allan pointed around. "If you saw a beautiful landscape and it was peppered with litter, it would be diminished," he said. "I feel the same way about the sonic landscape." It's now difficult to find a litter-free sonic zone anywhere in the UK, he continued. "You can study maps of elevation and roads and flyways to pinpoint potential spots, but do very little (and sometimes nothing at all) when that same hillside is surrounded by A-roads and railway lines, which blot the landscape in their own way. "To not be able to experience nature without human noise," he said, "to me that feels like a real loss."

Which is why he agreed to work on the Heath. Allan spent four days in the park in total, monitoring decibel levels. To pass the QPI test, noise levels must remain below 40 decibels, similar to the hush of a library, for at least an hour. That level can be breached eight times, but only by noises up to 60 decibels – nothing louder than the whir of an electric toothbrush. This standard is an outline, Allan said – every now and then you have to go with your gut. (The rustling of leaves shouldn't be considered a disturbance, Allan thinks, even if it exceeds decibel limits.) Sometimes during a recording a dog would bark, or an aeroplane would fly low overhead, or parakeets would squawk from trees, sending decibel levels soaring. But mostly he was able to record quiet for the necessary stretches of time, and the Heath was given its award.

Though many of us drive, and fly, and listen to music, and turn the volume of our TVs up very high, and drill and saw and hammer, and live in busy cities, which are relentlessly loud, we do seem to broadly understand that too much noise is bad for us. To escape, some turn to wellness practices – meditation, sensory-deprivation tanks, silent retreats – which have turned quiet into a consumable product. A new acquaintance of mine, a London vicar, recently told me he goes on silent retreats three times a year, to "discover stillness". I remember thinking, if a vicar is surrounded by so much noise he seeks sanctuary, shouldn't we all?

One of QPI's missions involves bringing "quiet to all", a nod to the fact that wellness practices can be expensive and exclusive, and that quiet should be available to everyone as an essential ingredient of being alive, like clean water and clean air.

QPI was founded by Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist, who lives in Seattle. We speak one day over Zoom, while Hempton walks a trail near to Olympic National Park, a vast wilderness in the Pacific Northwest. When I ask him about the commodification of silence, he says, plainly, "The more scarce it becomes, the more valuable it becomes." A decade ago, Hempton was able to record hours of consecutive silence in Olympic National Park. Even then, he warned land owners the noise was coming. "The most common response we'd get was, 'Why do we need to save something that will never be endangered?'" he says. "They couldn't imagine how they could ever have an issue with noise pollution." Recently, Hempton realised



he could now only record 15 minutes of quiet in the park before some man-made noise interjected.

This is bad news for wildlife, which relies on quiet to communicate. But it is also bad news for us. Studies have shown that experiencing quiet can reduce stress and anxiety, bring down heart rate and blood pressure, improve mood, cognitive ability and concentration, and increase pro-social behaviours, such as generosity and trust. It is helpful to experience silence in long periods, though every little helps – a 2006 study found that even a minutes-long session can be beneficial.

Five years ago, after the birth of our first child, my wife and I moved from central London to a quiet town on the edge of the Chiltern Hills. When we'd arrived in London, a decade earlier, we'd been surprised, naively, by the noise – the unending whir of it, its eternal presence – and we joked we wouldn't be able to fall asleep. When we left, we worried the calm of our new environment would now keep us awake, its nothingness startling. I began to experience the quiet as a void. Was life passing me by? When, not long after we moved, my wife became seriously unwell, and an additional, enforced quiet descended on our home for months, I found it too much to bear. I remember worrying about the situation to my sister, who said, correctly, "People normally complain *about* the noise, not the lack of it."

Hempton is aware silence can be frightening to those who are out of practice at embracing it. To that end, the pandemic has been helpful, he says. "Quiet is no longer a word that has no experience. The whole world got to experience what we'd been missing. And initially, of course, it was alarming: 'Why are things different?' 'What's going to happen next?' But now we're beginning to emerge, we can reflect on how there were aspects of that quiet that made us healthier, made us more aware of who we are and what we believe in, what we want to do."

On the Heath, Allan told me that, at the beginning of the pandemic, "several friends commented on suddenly being

'The more scarce that silence becomes, the more valuable it becomes': (from top) QPI founder Gordon Hempton; Nicholas Allan. Right: measuring noise



'To not be able to experience nature without human noise feels to me like a real loss'

able to hear birdsong near to their homes." For a while, they speculated as to whether there were more birds that year. "I think it's just accepted now that that acute hum had dropped, and you could suddenly hear into the distance."

"Like now?" I said.

We were walking past a small knot of trees. Around us was birdsong and the sound of shaking leaves.

"It's actually quite noisy today," Allan said. "There's that strange noise. I'm not sure what it is. Can you hear that?" He waved his hands in the direction of the park boundary. In the distance there was a steady, specific low-level drone, similar to an aeroplane's rumble but closer to earth.

"What is that?" he said. "A drill?"

We continued walking, first up a hill to a muddy brow, and then on into woodland. Once we were surrounded by trees, the drone was less present. "As we walk further into the park, it's slowly nurturing our inner stillness," Allan said. "Or hopefully it is." In the woodland we came to a depression, a big green-brown bowl, and when we reached the bottom the drone was all but gone. I looked up and saw an aeroplane but couldn't hear it, then mentioned that it seemed as though we could have been deep in the countryside now, rather than in the middle of a city. Allan nodded. This is what it had been like when he visited the park previously: quiet, save for the rustling of leaves, the soft-crunch of walkers' footsteps, the odd flyover.

Then a crow called so loudly it resembled a dog's bark, startling us both. "That *wouldn't* be considered a disturbance," Allan said. "That's part of the natural soundscape. People seem to be in agreement that that's calming."

Moments later, a chainsaw began to rev, shocking more crows out of the trees. Allan seemed disheartened – there had been no chainsaws when he was making the QPI recordings. Up ahead, three park employees were cutting down large branches and laughing. We walked towards them, closer to the noise, and then in a different direction, away from the sound. Allan was frowning. "We'd never have *complete* silence," he said, by way of explanation. "There would always be something." Then he said, "It really does feel quite noisy." ■

Food & drink

Nigel Slater

🐦 @NigelSlater



Rhubarb and mango will brighten any winter's day

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

There was barely a garden without its rhubarb patch. Usually close to the compost heap, leaves large enough for a child to hide under. Our neighbours, aunts and uncles all had one, crimson stalks to cut for crumble and pie, for chutney and jam and for dipping raw into the sugar bowl. I have repeatedly tried to grow it, but the crowns fail each time.

Early rhubarb is a treat. Long, pale stems with a delicate flavour and a hefty price tag to cheer up a grey winter's day. Something to cheer those of us for whom pudding is a necessity rather than an option. Tempting though an old-fashioned rhubarb fool may be – the pink stalks marbling whipped cream or custard – the flavour of the early, forced fruit can

too easily be smothered. Better, probably, to prepare it without a blanket of dairy produce, where its flavour can shine.

Orange juice is a friend to rhubarb, as is a little sugar or a trickle of pale, mild honey. The spice rack is helpful, too. Perhaps a flower or two of star anise or cardamom pods, cracked open. Possibly a clove. I have a fondness for a splash – no more – of rosewater or orange blossom water, the ghost of fragrant petals wafting up as you open the oven door.

Tender stems – far from the tough old trunks we grew at home – can easily fall apart, and I find them best baked rather than simmered on the hob. Never let them boil unless you are making a preserve. The short lengths, like sticks

of seaside rock, piled on one another and baked with fruit juice and sweet spice is all they need. The juice is deepest rose pink and invigoratingly sharp to drink.

Clean, tart notes have been running amok in the kitchen this week with a tangle of bean sprouts, green mango and cucumber. A salad to accompany some chilli-hot wings eaten with our fingers. A recipe to blow the cobwebs away.

Baked rhubarb with orange and rosewater

Just as a rose has thorns, the essence distilled from its petals needs treating with care, too. One drop too many and the warm, fleeting breath of rose turns to soap, so I add no more than a teaspoon. Get the amount right and the effect is as pleasing as finding a rose open in the garden on a grey January day. *Serves 4*

rhubarb stalks 750g
orange 1
caster sugar 3 tbsps
cardamom pods 6
rosewater 1 tsp

Trim the rhubarb, then cut each stalk into 5cm lengths. Pack them into a baking dish and heat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6.

Halve the orange and squeeze the juice into a small bowl. Stir in the caster sugar. Crack open the cardamom pods and add to the juice. Stir in the rosewater, then pour over the rhubarb. Bake for 45 minutes until the stalks are tender, but still in one piece. Test them with a skewer.

Serve with its juices spooned over.

Chicken wings, bean sprout and green mango salad

A bright tasting, crunchy salad with hot, sweet chicken wings. You will need forks and fingers for this one. *Serves 4*

chicken wings 750g
groundnut oil a little
dried chilli flakes 3 tsp
light muscovado sugar 2 tbsps

For the salad:
bean shoots 75g
shallot 1, large
groundnut oil 3 tbsps
rice vinegar 50ml
lime juice 50ml
light muscovado sugar 1½ tsp
fish sauce 2 tbsps
red chilli 1, finely chopped



In the pink: baked rhubarb
with orange and rosewater.
Facing page: chicken
wings, beansprout and
green mango salad



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Food & drink

Nigel Slater

Get the amount of rosewater right and the effect is as pleasing as finding a rose on a grey January day

► cucumber 150g
mango 1
coriander leaves a handful
peanuts 50g, shelled

Heat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Place the wings on a baking tray in a shallow layer, almost touching. (If they are too close together they won't crisp.)

Pour the oil over the wings, scatter with the dried chilli and a little salt, then toss to thoroughly coat each wing. Bake for 50 minutes until their skin has started to crisp, then sprinkle lightly with muscovado sugar and continue baking for a further 7 minutes until the sugar has begun to caramelize. Pile the wings in a dish for everyone to help themselves.

To make the salad, fill a bowl with ice and water then dunk the beanshoots in it to crisp them up. Leave them to soak while you prepare the rest of the salad.

Peel the shallot and slice it thinly. In a shallow pan, heat 2 tbsp of the groundnut oil, then add the shallot and cook for 7-10 minutes over a moderate heat until it starts to turn deep gold. Watch carefully, stirring from time to time, as it darkens to nut brown. Immediately remove from the heat and lift the fried shallots out with a draining spoon on to kitchen paper.

Pour the rice vinegar into a mixing bowl and squeeze in the lime juice. Add the muscovado sugar and stir until dissolved, then add the fish sauce.

Slice the chillies in half, scrape out the seeds, then finely slice and add to the dressing. Peel the cucumber – or not, as you wish – then cut in half lengthways. Slice the halves into strips about the thickness of a matchstick, then cut into 10cm lengths. Add them to the dressing. Peel the mango and cut the flesh into long, wide slices, working around the stone. Cut each slice into thin strips.

Tear the coriander leaves and toss with the mango and dressing. Drain the bean sprouts, shake them dry and add them, too.

Warm the remaining tbsp of oil in a shallow pan and add the peanuts, moving them around until golden brown. Lift them out with a draining spoon and sprinkle with finely ground salt, then roughly chop them. Add the onions and peanuts to the salad and serve with the hot wings. ■



Nigel's midweek dinner

Baked roots with curry cream

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

Grated winter root vegetables – celeriac, carrots and parsnips – with a mild curry cream sauce make a tasty light supper with brown rice or a good side dish.

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Peel 300g of **parsnips** and scrub 200g of **carrots**. Slice away the peel and roots from a large **celeriac** to give 350g of flesh. Grate the parsnips, carrots and celeriac coarsely into thin matchsticks.

Heat 5 tbsp of **groundnut oil** in a shallow pan, add the grated roots and let them cook for 10 minutes or so until pale gold, turning them now and again. When they are golden and softened, transfer to a large, wide baking dish, (I use one at least 24cm in diameter) leaving gaps in which to pour the sauce.

Peel a large clove of **garlic** and crush it to a paste with a pinch of salt using a heavy weight, such as a pestle. Stir 2 tbsp of **curry paste** into the garlic

and salt, then gently stir in 300ml of **double cream**. Spoon the curry cream sauce into the dish. The mixture shouldn't cover the roots.

Bake for 25 minutes until bubbling around the edges. Roughly chop a handful of **pumpkin seeds** and a handful of **parsley** or **coriander leaves**, then scatter them over the surface as you bring the dish to the table. *Serves 3*

◆ You could substitute potatoes for celeriac if you wish.

◆ This is a light supper with rice (especially good with steamed brown basmati), but also makes a pleasing side dish for grilled chicken or baked mushrooms.

◆ Make this more of a gratin by doubling the quantity of sauce and topping with fine fresh breadcrumbs. Bake for 10 minutes longer.

Food & drink

Jay Rayner



Twitter @jayrayner1

Bright flavours will tempt you at this new place in Soho – but be sure to leave room for the baklava

Zahter

30–32 Foubert's Place, London W1F 7PS (zahter.co.uk)
Hot and cold mezze **£9–£18**
Platters **£18–£42**
Desserts **£8–£9**
Wines from **£29**

The Instagram accounts I follow, like the gummy jars of condiments I collect in my fridge, are a hot mess: chefs showing off what they knocked up last night; carpetbagging food “influencers” whose brass neck enthralls but doesn't influence me; jazz pianists offering useful tips; Grace Dent, because who wouldn't

want a window on her fabulous life? By far the most entertaining is @yemelerdeyizcom, a Turkish food and drink account, which posts endless videos of just two things: lamb kebabs being made, and portioned rounds of baklava being finished and boxed. The latter are always beautiful. There's the ladling of the steaming syrup, the shiny golden curve of the filo pastry and the brilliant green of the crushed pistachios. Watching these videos is not the most embarrassing online displacement activity for a middle-aged man, but it's bloody close. Best to have it out there.

Like the tragic rainbow chaser that I am, I had always assumed this to be the very best baklava possible: the platonic ideal of the polyamorous marriage of pistachios, filo and syrup, and one that I should aspire to experience. Then I was served the baklava at Zahter, a new restaurant off London's Carnaby Street which re-examines the Turkish repertoire. It's not Instagram beautiful or it may be, but in the low light it's impossible to see. (Go check my Insta where I am @jayrayner1, and I will have posted a picture.) But by God, it's good; so good that its gorgeousness could not be relegated to the end of this column when I might be short on space.

There is none of the mouth-drying, friable confetti of overbaked filo. It is soft and luscious. Too often baklava can be cloyingly oversweet, like the maker has some side hustle knocking out insulin and is looking to recruit new customers. This is perfectly balanced so the flavour of the pistachio is also allowed its voice and, just to be on the safe side, there is a quenelle of thick cream. It is quite simply the best baklava I have ever eaten.

It is a massive symphonic coda, a big thump of brass and strings at the end of a meal which, to extend a metaphor until it snaps, was big on cheery melodies and harmonies. Zahter, the Turkish name for a variety of wild thyme, occupies a tottering corner site with a cheery view of the street life outside. It is the first standalone venture from Turkish chef Esra Muslu. After training in Australia, she ran a series of restaurants in Istanbul before being recruited as head chef of Soho House in the city. From there she moved to a similar role at the company's outpost in London's



Luscious, with perfectly balanced pistachio flavours, this is quite simply the best baklava I have ever eaten

Sweet sensation: (clockwise from left) baklava; the restaurant; stuffed globe artichoke; roast tiger prawns; lamb kofta; and roasted quince

Shoreditch and then to Ottolenghi in Spitalfields.

The menu, built around both a wood and a charcoal-burning oven, is a wandering journey across Turkey. From the south make sure to order the stuffed globe artichoke. Also make sure to bring an enthusiastic friend to help you eat it. The £16 price tag looks chunky in the extreme until it arrives. It is a very large, mature flower and a victory of a day's preparation. After simmering in acidulated water, the choke is removed, the leaves put back in place on to the heart and trimmed. While it is still warm, it is bathed in a fragrant lemony dressing. Then comes a stuffing of rice, spiced with cinnamon and allspice, lemon juice and handfuls of fresh green herbs. The stuffing is pushed in between every leaf, into every nook and cranny. Finally, it's piled with more chopped green herbs, toasted almonds and shiny pomegranate seeds. There is a still-warm wedge of roasted lemon on the top for an extra squeeze. It's one of those utterly engrossing and formidable dishes, which draws you in one leaf at a time.

That and the baklava would make a sustaining dinner, but I understand my responsibilities. There must be more. We have an ovenware dish of tiger prawns roasted in frothing lakes of garlic butter, hefty with Aleppo pepper, which leaves juices behind that demand to be mopped away with their airy breads. We have roasted and crusted chicken livers under bales of fresh green herbs. Only a fava bean purée with grape slices that have been doused in the anise-boosted spirit raki doesn't quite hit the spot, being overly sweet. For balance, we turn to the section of the menu headed platters, and a quite magnificent dish of dense lamb kofta with white beans, fresh red chilli and further handfuls of flat leaf, all piled on to a flat bread cheerfully absorbing the very essence of what has been shovelled on top of it.

Then comes half a roasted quince, and finally that baklava with a capital B. Zahter has been open only a few weeks when I visit, and is trading into difficult circumstances, but still has a youthful buzz and assuredness to it. It feels like a mature restaurant though not, it must be said, one aimed necessarily at a mature clientele. In this week's *Observer Food Monthly* my regular column is a plea for new restaurants to employ someone who is at least in their 50s to help judge the environment they are building. I can't pretend. Everything I whinge about in that column is present here at Zahter. I do have to use my iPhone torch to read the menu. The piped music and the hard surfaces make for a clattering acoustic. The upstairs dining room is reached via vertiginous stairs. For good measure the tables are too small for the way in which the kitchen sends out the dishes all at once. We end up with our wine and water bottle on the floor next to us.

If Zahter doesn't want older gits like me in their restaurant, whining about the lighting and the sound and the table size, then fine. But there's an issue. Zahter's food is great. There's also value here, but it is not cheap. The short wine list starts at £29 a bottle before heading into the 30s and beyond. As the information at the top shows, the dishes are, shall we say, boldly priced. The final £150 bill does not feel extortionate for this food and this service and this location. But perhaps turn the music down and the lights up a little so you don't risk excluding a whole demographic who may best be able to afford it. My motives are pure. I really do want as many people as possible to enjoy that fabulous baklava. ■

Notes on chocolate

Bars as pretty as a picture. By Annalisa Barbieri

I am a sucker for lifestyle suggestions and pretty packaging. Show me a picture of someone wearing fingerless gloves, cupping a marshmallow-crowned hot chocolate and I'm there. So when I found some chocolates that not only had gorgeous packaging but were named after the sort of occasion where you might eat it, well.

This was **Josh's Chocolate**, which I found on a freezing day in a shop called Join in Clare, Suffolk, although the company is Cornish. There were beautifully packaged giant chocolate buttons, £4.60 (145g), but it was the bars that got me. Stunningly illustrated by Joanne Barry (shout out to the artists!), paper-jacketed and with names such as Weekends on the Water (milk chocolate with Cornish sea salt and

caramel), A Ramble in the Woods (milk chocolate with blueberry and hazelnut), and A Stroll Along the Harbour (milk, cranberry, almond, cinnamon). But the one that spoke to me, as my nose reddened with the warmth of the shop vs the cold outside, was Friends by the Fire, 55% dark with little chunks of ginger, illustrated with a picture of friends, indeed, sitting by a wood burner, ignoring its carcinogenic effects.

This isn't single-origin craft chocolate, but it's very nice at £3.95 a bar (100g), and various other permutations are available, plus hot chocolate spoons (a chunk of chocolate on the end of a lolly stick to dunk into warm milk). It's like a card and a chocolate in one and a few bars of this would make a lovely present to cheer up someone's January.



Wines of the week

Rich, red and rewarding, these Portuguese wines will lift the spirits. By David Williams

🐦 @Daveydaibach

No 1 Douro Red, Douro Portugal 2019
£11.99, Waitrose

wine par excellence (its dark-fruited riches are ideally suited to brightening winter-darkened hearts), Portugal is the source of some of the most deliciously different, good-value table wines around. The Douro Valley is a logical first port of call. Red wines made from the same grape varieties as port – touriga nacional, trincadeira, tinta roriz and others – carry something of port's forest-fruited bounty, but are dry and significantly less powerfully alcoholic. Waitrose has a beautifully fragrant example from Quinta de la Rosa, a producer behind some of the region's most refined ports.

Niepoort Nat Cool Bairrada Portugal 2020
£19.50, 1 litre, Buon Vino

Douro wines ranges from the exceptional dry white Redoma Branco 2019 (£23.25, cambridgewine.com) to the seriously fine, feline-slinky red Batuta 2017 (£69.95, uncorked.co.uk) and the vivaciously plummy Niepoort Late Bottled Vintage Port 2016 (£11.95 for a sensibly-sized 37.5cl bottle, slurp.co.uk). As well as tending to his ever-growing Douro collection, the restless Niepoort's interests have expanded to the Dão and Bairrada regions. In the latter, he has become a committed fan of the local red бага grape, which he uses to make his snazzy, berry-sappy Nat Cool Bairrada.

Geno Tinto, Alentejo Portugal 2019
£7.99, Partridges

with interests throughout the country, João Portugal Ramos, is behind the reliably rich, sweetly spiced Ramos Reserva Vinho Regional Alentejano 2019 (£8.99 or £7.49 as part of a mixed case of six bottles, majestic.co.uk), while Geno Tinto 2019 is a gluggably fresh alternative. For white bargains, it's better to head north, to the Atlantic-cooled green pleasantness and tinglingly snappy wines of Vinho Verde. The Co-op's light-on-its-feet (just 9.5% abv) Vale dos Pombos Vinho Verde (£6), for example, was very good with the kind of reviving but not-too-spicy Vietnamese-style salad that enlivens dark evenings at this time of year.



Style Notebook

Edited by **PETER BEVAN**

Hit your stride in activewear that puts smiles into your miles



From left: T-shirt, £58, shorts, £68, and socks, £16; grey tank, £48, leggings, £88, and trainers, £120; and black vest, £48, and shorts, £68, all by allbirds.co.uk



Fitness tracker
£149.99,
fitbit.com



GEL 1090 trainers
£80, asics.com



Recycled top £25,
and
leggings
£42,
[nobodys
child.com](http://nobodyschild.com)



Technical jacket £115, and **shorts** £60,
both by 7daysactive.com



Cap £45,
Reiss x Castore
(reiss.com)



Nylon tote £130,
tedbaker.com



Recycled steel bottle
£43, the
pangaia.com



Condor 2 (57% bio-based and recycled) £130, veja-store.com

Beauty Funmi Fetto

@FunmiFetto



Bold as brass: glowy skin made easy

Scraped-back hair is not everyone's cup of tea, but I love it. It is unapologetic and bold. As is the minimal approach to makeup. But it requires confidence. Hence, the latest foundations (try Lisa Eldridge and Charlotte Tilbury, as well as Nars and Dior Skin) are all about an easy finish that leaves you with the best, glowy version of your skin. Dot a few pea-sized amounts all over your face, add black liner, brush up brows and finish with a hint of gloss. Done. But not too done.

1. Nars Light Reflecting Foundation £37.50, narscosmetics.co.uk (available from 1 February) **2. Aveda Invati Thickening Brow Serum** £56, aveda.com **3. Jillian Dempsey Khol Eyeliner** £18.50, feelunique.com **4. Saie Lip Gloss** £18, cultbeauty.co.uk **5. Dior Skin Forever Foundation** £37, dior.com



I can't do without...

A three-in-one
creamy spray by
a beauty insider

**Violette FR
Boum-Boum Milk**
£56 violettefr.com

A lot has been said about beauty lines from celebrities (long story short, there are far too many of them and 99.9% of them have no legitimate reason to exist). Beauty lines from beauty insiders/experts? Well, this is another kettle of fish. I mean, some of them also fall into the aforementioned category but, for the most part, they are created on the back of a lot of skin in the game. Such as Violette FR, which was founded by Violette Serrat, the much-adored French makeup artist who has also worked as a creative director and consultant to numerous big-name beauty brands. The concept of her range is built around the pared-down French-girl aesthetic except, for once, it feels wholly inclusive – so regardless of age or cultural heritage, you don't feel marginalised. I am currently obsessed with the Boum-Boum Milk. This three-in-one creamy spray is at once a toner, serum and moisturiser. It is great for anyone who wants intense moisture, but can't stand heavy textures. It's also in keeping with the increasing popularity of skinminimalism – ie using fewer products in your skincare regime, which is better for the environment and for your skin. Boum-Boum Milk, which balances skin, injects intense hydration and leaves you with an impressive glow, is an absolute hit in my book. I find I need little else on my skin. Efficacious formulations like these are the future of skincare.



On my radar

Hardworking
heroes for hair,
face and body

Quench your thirst

If you've overdone it on exfoliating acids, or have parched or oily skin that loves moisture without the weight, look no further than this intensely hydrating gel mask. **Vichy Quenching Mineral Face Mask**, £15, feelunique.com



Bouncing back

Dull, brittle hair is one of the many joys of a cold winter and central heating. This conditioner, with vegan keratin and botanical ingredients, will nurse hair back to health. **Lazartigue Intensive Repair Conditioner**, £24, lookfantastic.com



Body of evidence

Bodycare products are increasingly being created with the kind of ingredients you'd expect in skincare for your face. This cult US brand, arguably a pioneer of the movement, is finally in the UK. **Nécessaire Body Serum**, £45, necessaire.com





Luxurious Lebanon

A stunning Beirut apartment gives the traditional Middle Eastern aesthetic a modern twist

Words SHARON WALKER Photographs IANNIELLO



When furniture designer Nada Debs first moved to Beirut from London in 2000 on a quest to reconnect with her Lebanese roots, her parents offered her the apartment they'd bought in the 1980s. "At the time it was rented out and they just said: 'Why don't you take it?'" So it was more a marriage of convenience than love at first sight."

Located on the 10th floor of a 1970s apartment block in a residential area of West Beirut, there was nothing immediately remarkable about the space.

"The apartment isn't something I'd have chosen," says Debs. "But I made the best of it and because it was simple, I had a lot of freedom to use my furniture. I would make prototypes, put them out and see how they looked, before I made them into collections. I used my home as kind of a place of experimentation."

When Debs first got her hands on the apartment she set about stamping her vision on the space, tearing down walls to let the light in and make the most of the views of the sea and mountains.

"I love breaking walls," she says with a gleeful twinkle. "The apartment was originally designed for a family and there were four bedrooms, but it's just me here, so I tried to make it less for a family and more a space for entertaining."

Today her home is flooded with light

'When I came to the Lebanon, I was looking for Middle Eastern furniture and realised it was stuck in the past': (from left) the living space; designer Nada Debs; windows with views out to sea; the yellow sitting room; contemporary furniture in the dining room



as Debs leads the way through a series of elegant living spaces, popping with jewel colours. Her curvaceous Yves Klein Blue sofa, that she designed herself, is a striking focal point. "I'm a big fan of blue – the blues of Beirut are beautiful. And every day the colour of this sea and the sky is different, so that definitely influenced me," she says.

Then there's the cosy pink kitchen/diner, which was inspired by the lush visuals of the Hong Kong-set movie *In the Mood for Love*. From here we walk through to the yellow TV room, which was originally the balcony, but now serves as an indoor/outdoor living area that catches the morning sun.

"I always like to start with colour before



thinking about form and then, finally, I address the details," she says. "In this house each room is themed. I wouldn't do that for a client, but this is more an experimental space."

And with three different living rooms to choose from, there's a room for every mood. "It's, 'Oh am I going to be blue-me today or am I going yellow today?' And it's really interesting, when I have guests, people are drawn to different colours. Some people look at the pink room and think, 'Oh I'm not going in there, it's a bit too cozy, I'll never get up again. So it's more for late at night.'"

Dramatic dark doors add an extra layer of sophistication, while rugs play a key role in separating the spaces.

"I based the apartment on placing carpets first," says Debs. "When you have an open space it's really hard to place furniture first, but when you put a carpet down that defines the space."

Despite her own elegant, pared-back aesthetic, Debs is wary of hotel-like, interior-designed spaces. "Too perfect is soulless. You have to have knick-knacks," she says firmly. "A home should be personalised and not so rigid."

For her own part, she likes to mix up finds from Beirut's Basta antique market alongside favourite art pieces and the odd family heirloom, like the oversized round Chinese terracotta rug in the sitting room, which her uncle bought back from Shanghai in the 1950s.

Originally trained in interior architecture at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design in the US, Debs had been working with marquetry in the UK, a technique used to create patterns on furniture, but her move to Beirut inspired a bold new direction in her work.

"When I came to the Lebanon, I was looking for Middle Eastern furniture, and I realised it was stuck in the past," she says. "I was asking, 'Where's Middle Eastern furniture?' And it didn't exist. So I created my own." She began working with local craftsmen and artisans, reconfiguring the Middle Eastern designs to give them a more contemporary feel.

"Because I grew up in Japan, I introduced my Japanese aesthetics, which is about simplifying and bringing things down to its essence. That's the little twist in my work, because Japanese style is quite understated, whereas in the Middle East everything is overstated." ■ nadadebs.com

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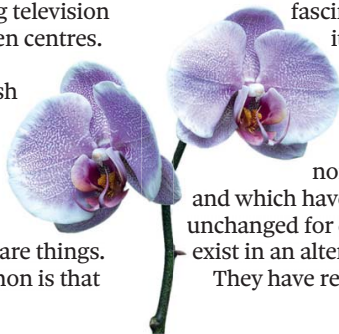


Youthful plant lovers are all about change

It's amazing, for me at least, to think that I have been working in horticulture for the best part of two decades. For almost all that time there has been real concern about how to get new audiences, and in particular younger people, into the art. I have often been invited to sit on industry boards to brainstorm new approaches and asked to consult on huge campaigns, all of which have simply insisted on churning out more of the same. So it is exciting to see young people are now doing it for themselves – in radically different ways, essentially creating what I think can only be described as a parallel horticultural universe.

In the past five years there has been an absolute explosion in the interest in plants among younger generations. With the hashtag #plantsofinstagram racking up almost 13,000 posts, more than six times that of #avocadotoast, and some houseplant retailers reporting a 500% spike in interest over the past year or so, this is the radical transformation we have desperately needed.

But when you meet them, these new horticulturists don't read gardening magazines, watch gardening television shows or even shop in garden centres. They often come from backgrounds like tropical fish or exotic pet keeping, or the geeky science of lighting or hydroponic tech. Or they have a passion for interior design, or simply a fascination with collecting rare things. But what they have in common is that



almost all have got into plants through totally novel routes. To me, what is so fascinating about this is how it creates a palette of plants, new techniques and an aesthetic which are all wildly different to the staid horticultural norms I grew up with and which have remained largely unchanged for decades. And it seems to exist in an alternate gardening reality. They have really built their own

gardening media on YouTube and Instagram that is far more dynamic, experimental and accessible than traditional garden media, which in my experience is notoriously risk adverse, repetitive and open only to people of a very fixed social and ethnic demographic.

They have even started their own nurseries online, like the achingly cool Grow Tropicals, Spicesotic Plants and Ugly Plantling, sold on internet auction sites and at fairs with more ironic beards

and arm tattoos than you might see at craft beer festivals.

At a recent packed-out event, I asked the audience of young plant geeks, some decades younger than me – for my own curiosity – how many of them were actually trained horticulturists. Only two hands went up and both had been kicked out of horticultural college for allegedly collecting too many plants and for having unusual pets in their student dorms.

No wonder things are changing, and thank goodness it's for the better! ■

Interest spike: (above) a love of novel plants, such as the bottlebrush flower and, below, the lilac orchid, has grown hugely among the young

Plot 29

It's hard to look forward without remembering past lessons.

By Allan Jenkins

January for me is often melancholic. Deep midwinter. Yesterday was my birthday. Too close to Christmas. A time for taking stock. For giving thanks. For looking back as much as forward. Something I am prone to do anyway.

We are still exiled from the allotments. So much gardening now is done in my head. How will it be with new soil on the old site? How to bring it to life? Will we need to garden it differently? How do we feel about no-dig?

Exile was a constant in

my early childhood. Being transplanted. New parents, new names, new places to live. Getting my family visa renewed. Putting down new roots.

Gardening brought me comfort. New life from old land was the lesson. Spring always following winter. Needing to hold on longer.

Christopher, my older brother, strayed. I stayed – though I loved walking alone along the river, searching for flashes of kingfisher. Listening for curlews.

Land quickly connected



'He strayed, I stayed': (from left) Christopher and Allan in South Devon

me. Sowing my first flowers. Digging Dad's new potatoes for Saturday or Sunday lunch. Watching butterflies swarming on the buddleia. I was fascinated by their almost anxious flight.

Nasturtiums saved me. A perfect first flower: bright, transforming, super reliable. Their vines reached out. Needy, even greedy, like me.

My first job in London aged 19 was at a plant nursery. A Kensington and Chelsea world of competitive window boxes, potted summer planting. I collected

the misshapen and broken shrubs and plants. I rooted through skips.

I gave unwanted shrubs and plants a home in our gardens. Front and back, indoors and out. Others I planted out along the street. It took me a long while to realise there was a reason other than the sheer joy in colour. Though there is always that, too...

Allan Jenkins's *Plot 29* (4th Estate, £9.99) is out now. Order it for £8.49 from guardianbookshop.com

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Walk this way

Discover the secrets of the UK on foot with these great guided tours

Words **LOUISE RODDON**

1 Guided hikes in Anglesey
Head to Anglesey this winter and learn how shipwrecks, princes and tragic lovers shaped this idyllic island. You can fashion your day to suit your interests, or combine that guided hike with a headrush of thrilling experiences – all offered by Knowdownia, North Wales's new, itinerary-free tour company. Try out the world's fastest zipline, surf in remote bays, or admire Snowdonia's mountain range while thundering over twisty dirt tracks on a gravity-driven quarry kart. Guided walks available all year. A one-day experience costs from £325 for four people and includes pick-up and drop-off anywhere in North Wales; knowdownia.com



2 Puffin-spotting in Northern Ireland
For bird lovers, the half-day guided Gobbins Walk is an absolute gem. Northern Ireland's classic trail has finally reopened – and walking in winter adds drama to its wild beauty. Trailing a path that cuts through narrow tunnels, bridges and staircases cut into the Causeway's coastal cliffs, you'll witness the only mainland colony of puffins in Northern Ireland, plus kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots. The walk costs £20pp adults, £14pp children. Book through Ballygally Castle, which offers overnight stays from £60 B&B; hastingshotels.com/ballygally-castle

3 Foraging in the Malvern Hills
Join this guided tour of dense woods, hedgerows and undulating hills in the frost-tinged Severn Valley with food writer Clare Knivett, and you'll learn the sort of tips that were second nature to our ancestors. Clare's knowledge of wild fruits, flowers and plants is second to none. In January and February, you can expect to forage for winter herbs such as cleavers, alongside chickweed, nutrient-dense nettles, ground ivy and wild garlic. Afterwards, learn useful recipes as well as tips on living more seasonally. This 2.5 hour walk costs £35pp (minimum of four booking); foodandforaging.com



4 Stargaze on Exmoor
Draw your kids' eyes away from their screens and lift them to the star-filled skies of Exmoor. Thanks to minimal light pollution, Exmoor National Park has some of the best dark skies in the UK, and on a cloud-free night you can expect to see thousands of dazzlers. The Pinkery Centre has a guided stargazing event in February that includes a fun bushcraft adventure. The centre has 15 ensuite bunk-bed rooms sleeping four to six. The Pinkery Night Sky and Bushcraft Adventure takes place on 21 February. More details from exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/enjoying/stargazing



5 Mother and daughter bonding in Scotland
Cut through those tricky adolescent tensions on this guided walk for mothers and teens around Lothian's gorgeous Yellowcraigs beach, and with views out to Fidra Island (the inspiration for *Treasure Island*). Run by WanderWomen, the half-day bonding experience takes the focus off hot topics through mindfulness sessions, reflection, meditation, walking, fire-making, sea swimming and forest bathing. Mama and Teen Daughter guided walk is on 23 January and costs £70pp. More information from wander-women.co.uk

6 Discover the City's secret gardens
London's Square Mile is home to 376 open and green spaces. The new City Secret Gardens walk, run by Blue Badge guide Katie Wignall, explores some of the best and most unusual gardens in the area. Each one, from hidden oases to the more famous spots like St Dunstan-in-the-East and Postman's Park, has a fascinating history. The walk on 12 February costs £20pp. More information at lookup.london

7 History walk in Manchester
To uncover Manchester's vibrant history, join the three-hour Rock and Goal Tour with insider guide Joe. Highlights include discovering how Manchester played a leading role

in ending both slavery and the Second World War, the roots of music stars, and discovering where Hollywood movies were filmed. Some of those stairways are pure New York... The walk runs throughout winter and costs £9.99pp; tripadvisor.co.uk

8 Bridgerton in Bath
With series two of the lockdown favourite *Bridgerton* due to drop, what better time to brush up on the stunning Bath locations in which it was set? Join the two-hour Bridgerton Experience walking tour, and your Blue Badge guide will point out film locations, and also unpack family life during the Georgian and Regency periods. The walk costs £15pp; more information at bathwalkingtours.com

9 Mind over matter in the Peaks
If the legacy of the pandemic has been anxiety and isolation, consider joining Mind over Mountains's six-hour walk in the Peak District this February. The charity offers therapeutic outdoor experiences for those experiencing mental health issues. Enjoy the company of like-minded yompers; seek tips from trained counsellors, or simply let the beauty of Hathersage Moor in the Dark Peak work its magic. The route starts from the National Trust's Longshaw Estate and crosses the rocky



outcrops of Higger Tor and Carl Wark, with fantastic views over Derwent valley. The walk on 26 February costs £39pp; mindovermountains.org.uk

10 Ghost tours of Brighton
This seaside city breathes quirkiness, reflected in an unusual array of guided walks. The Ghost Tour of the Lanes is a prime example, with actor Rob Marks kitted out like Sherlock Holmes as he regales the eight ghost stories attached to those narrow, cobbled alleyways. ■ The Ghost Walk of the Lanes runs Wednesdays to Saturdays and costs £8pp, adult; £4 children; family tickets, £20; ghostwalkbrighton.co.uk

Self & wellbeing

Photograph SOPHIA EVANS

Weekly rides with a group of supportive women is not only fun, it's a new route to finding happiness

Words TANYA FRANK

I always thought that joyriding meant nicking cars and taking them for a spin, often when drunk. It was what some of the wayward lads did on the Chingford Hall council estate where I grew up. So, I was surprised when the Waltham Forest newsletter reported a different kind of joyriding: a cycling group that is free, for women, and that loans bikes to the members who need them. It has grown since its inception, but JoyRiders started right here in my borough where we have an infrastructure of 27km of cycle paths, known as Mini Holland.

London was edging out of the last lockdown and one of the most isolating years we have ever experienced when I discovered the group. I had returned to my roots after living in California in the hope that this country might be kinder to my youngest son. He had bounced around in the mental health system in the USA for almost a decade, where the “cure” had been worse than the diagnosis. But the pandemic hampered my plan. When my son was admitted to a psychiatric hospital yet again, only here instead of in America, I knew I needed a better road map to find my way through the pain.

I hadn't cycled in ages, but I had loved it ever since first learning to pedal around the podium, a large concrete pad that encircled our estate. I felt safe with the two small additional wheels that Mum had mounted somewhat unevenly on my bike, despite them making me lean to one side, more like a Hell's Angel passenger on a Harley than a five-year-old girl on a Raleigh Chipper.

When it was time to ride without the stabilisers, Mum ran behind me shouting, “Pedal, pedal!” and then she gave me one almighty push into a world where it was just me and my bike. It was the way she did most things, confident that I would find my way.

Mum has long gone from this earth. I am the elder now. I feel it in my joints, see it in my face in the car mirror as I drive to Jubilee Park in Leyton for my first excursion with the JoyRiders. I hope I can keep up. I hope it doesn't hurt my back. I have already messaged Mariam, the co-director of the group, to say I am 5ft 6in tall and that I am heavy. She is leading the morning ride today and I want to make sure the bike I borrow will bear my weight. In retrospect my note is redundant. It is a sturdy hybrid Raleigh that I will be using, not a miniature pony.

Jubilee Park is waking to runners and dog walkers, and it smells of freshly cut grass. I make my way to the container where the stockpile of council-owned cycles is kept. Mariam has a softly spoken accent – a mix of her Dutch and German heritage – and a no-nonsense sense of leadership. She reassures me that my body will remember what to do. “Muscle memory,” she insists. I know that there are other things that my body keeps



'Hey sisters, well done, great ride today', Tanya Frank (fourth from left) with members of the JoyRiders in Edmonton

score of. The trauma of witnessing my son struggle over the years. I don't say anything about this, though, nor do I say that I am gay and Jewish. It doesn't seem relevant until the other women start arriving, many of them in traditional Islamic dress. Will it matter to them, I wonder? Is this the right group for me? Will I fit in?

Mariam welcomes everyone and works industriously to adjust my saddle so I can touch the ground with my tiptoes. She takes us through an ABCD checklist for our bikes: Air; Brakes; Chain; Direction. It is Soraya who speaks first, introducing herself and reminding me

how the gears work. She is also borrowing a bike. I watch as she hitches up her jilbab over a wide belt and places two cycle clips around her trousers. Her hijab is tucked neatly under her bike helmet. Some of the other women wear jilbabs and hijabs, too. There are no padded bike shorts here. No

Mariam reassures me, my body will remember what to do

titanium road bikes, either. As the women chat and fish in their rucksacks for their phones, their purses, their water bottles, I get the sense that this group is about community not competition, about pleasure not pace, but I am still not sure if it is for me.

We set off eventually with Mariam at the front and a volunteer in a hi-vis vest who takes up the rear. They have the route all mapped out on their phones, which are mounted on their handlebars. Where the streets are wide and quiet, we are asked to double up, to take a primary position, riding close to the centre of the road, where we can be seen more easily. Shazia is my partner. She tells me how she hasn't been riding that long, but that once her baby was old enough to be left with her mother-in-law, she did the cycle training course for beginners and then progressed to these intermediate rides. Her smile is contagious and I feel smug that we manage to stay aligned without crashing into each other.

There are 10 of us on this ride and as we pedal through the entrance to the Olympic Park, an area that I have never seen before even though it is on my doorstep, a child points to us and says, “Look Mum, so many.” I bravely take one hand off the handlebars to

wave at him, feeling a slight wobble to my frame. Inside the park we inadvertently spread into a V-shape. Like a flock of birds, we swarm over the wide bridge. A pedestrian sees how much fun we are having. “Who are you? Can I join?” she shouts at our backs. “JoyRiders. You can find us online,” the volunteer replies. Something about our chatter and laughter, the billowing of our clothes in the breeze reminds me of *The Sound of Music* and the von Trapp family cycling scene. It makes me think of my favourite things: family, my sons, the youngest one who I wish could experience this kind of freedom.

Even though there is still a knot of sadness in my chest, I feel it start to loosen. After fighting for support and services for so long, it is important to have a chance to just sit on the saddle and be led, to be told when to

turn left or right, to not have to be so hypervigilant.

We pass the London Aquatics Centre, an impressive site designed by Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, then we stop at a café for coffee. One of the women in the group is doing a PhD

about female cyclists, how we are still outnumbered by men, and the reasons why. She asks us questions as we sip at our drinks.

On the way back I speak to Shabnam, a family practice doctor. She tells me how hard it has been for her during the pandemic and it strikes me how little we know about each other, how many assumptions we make, and the danger of stereotypes. As if this isn't enough food for thought, as we are pedalling through the greenway, it is not a rider's long jilbab that gets caught in the chain of her bicycle and brings us all to a halt, but rather it is me. My jacket, which I had tied – somewhat haphazardly – around my waist, gets sucked into the spokes of my back wheel. All the women wait until I am disentangled. No JoyRider left behind.

When I get home, I am fatigued in a good way, a way that will help me sleep. I know that Tuesday mornings will be mine now. Weekends, too, on occasion. I invite my friend of more than three decades to join the group. During every ride we stop and pose for a group photograph with our bikes. I receive the pictures on our WhatsApp group, and the messages say things like, “Hey sisters, well done, great ride today.”

My favourite ride with the group is to Brick Lane. Amid the colourful graffiti, the women show me where to buy the best samosas. I point out where my grandmother used to come to get pickled herrings, then we talk about me getting my very own bike. Mariam and some of the sisters weigh in with advice. I want a hybrid. Gears are important, and a comfortable saddle. I tell the sisters how happy I am to be rediscovering my neighbourhood. What I know as being most important, though, is the change in my internal landscape, the opportunity to put on my brakes, lean into the community, and ride towards joy. ■

*Tanya Frank writes on the intersection of motherhood and mental health. Her debut memoir **Zig Zag Boy: Motherhood, Madness and Letting Go** will be published by HarperCollins in February 2023*

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Séamas O'Reilly

It won't be long before his sister arrives. But why is his dad's tummy also starting to grow?

🐦 @shockproofbeats



Telling our son that he was soon going to have a little sister was one of those rare moments where we got the sort of heart-warming reaction we'd hoped.

As parents, I mean, but certainly not as someone who hopes to write a palatably relatable column. He's continued choosing names for her – Pizza has now overtaken both Alexander and Blueberry in his top tier – and insisting, quite sweetly, that he'll be a doting big brother once she arrives, proving it by holding toys outstretched to his mum's stomach. It is, in short, the cuteness of one who has learned he will curry special favour by appearing adorable. Still, we do find it adorable, so the victory is his.

I shudder to include such stories because even I find that level of wholesome cheeriness a bit much. Look, I want to relate the sweet things he does because he's a lovely, nice boy of whom I am very fond, but if I veer too far into the

saccharine stuff, I picture my cruel and cynical readership writhing in their droves, blemishing this paper – or screen – with vomit in the process.

It behoves me to mask such sweetness with the thin veneer of crotchety snark that let's me have my cake and eat it, week after week. You know, 'Oh, I love him but he gets yoghurt everywhere and has started killing small rodents,' that kind of thing. It's a tactic that's served me well for a while now and I don't much feel like retiring it, which was making his absurdly charming reaction to news of his baby sister not just narratively inconvenient, but professionally embarrassing.

Luckily, he stepped up to the plate yesterday by offending me quite profoundly. His charming, if slightly invasive, habit of kissing his mum's stomach and whispering hello to his baby sister led him to do the same to my pale belly, tugging at and cooing over the child inside. He has since graduated to

shouting 'Helloooooo!' into my belly button.

We're not quite clear if he thinks I'm also pregnant, or if we simply swap incubation duties on an ad hoc basis. Either way, he cannot be dissuaded and now speaks often of my baby, and even places a gentle hand on my stomach any time it comes within admiring distance.

I'll try not to dwell too long on what led him to believe I, his doting father, could be with child, because this very magazine paid me money to lose a bit of weight a couple of years ago and I'm vaguely worried they'll make me pay it all back if I confess that my build has rebounded to pregnancy-confusion levels. I will simply continue to correct him, and request he refer all such affection to his mother, in the hopes he isn't upset to discover he has just the one sister arriving in a few months' time. For now, I'm content to let him pat, hug and slap my wobbly paunch after every large meal. Slap, slap, slap he goes. It's enough to make you sick.

Ask Philippa

If I stopped teaching, I worry people would think less of me



@Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

Comedian Helen Lederer on good food and friends

What time are you up? Later when it's darker and colder. I've got a bad habit of lolling and reaching for the TV. It's bad if Andrew Marr is on, because then I've stayed lolling too long. It's a sign I should be up and at my life.

What's for breakfast? I'm trying to get limber, so I've invested in a frightening PT who tells me not to eat breakfast until however long after the previous night's supper. I always forget how many hours it is, so I've got these CBD gummies from the health food shop. They're like fruit pastilles and they keep me going if I get a bit peckish.

What were Sundays like growing up? We'd have a cooked breakfast, with a nice table cloth, and my sister, my mother and father and I would store up news so we'd have a very nice conversation. For Sunday roast, we'd have beef – I remember it always being tied up with string. There'd be homemade Yorkshire pudding and a jug of gravy,

then at 4pm we'd have tea, with cake, followed by supper. It was a lot of food!

A Sunday tippie? It's a treat to drink in the daytime, but if I'm having lunch with friends, I might have two vodkas, because I'm under the impression it's healthier! At 7pm I might have a glass of cava with a bit of cassis, then I can half think it's Ribena. In the old days it would be more, but my excess has been moderated.

What makes Sunday special? My ideal is to be with nice people – people I like, who I hope like me, with a glass of something and some good food. I like it to be relaxed, not too full on. I had a lovely time at the Begging Bowl, a Thai place in Peckham. I was with two friends I hadn't seen for ages and it was so nice I burst into tears. I was het up because I'd been working hard. Every time the waiter came over, we waved him away, because we had to wait until I stopped crying. It was quite jolly! **Samantha Rea**

Helen Lederer is performing in Proud Cabaret All Stars at Proud Embankment in January, February and March (proudcabaret.com)



The question You said in a previous column that “a person is not their job”, which really resonated with me, because I’m wondering whether this is limiting my life. Whenever we meet someone, the small talk inevitably turns to “And what do you do?” For now, I am ready for that question. I am a teacher.

Although there is satisfaction from the work there is also the mental load of overseeing not only the education of pupils, but increasingly their welfare. I regularly think about packing it in for something that does not take up so much headspace. Being a teacher is how I have defined myself for 20 years. How could I square it with myself, if I had to describe myself with a non-professional job? I can't imagine saying “I stack shelves” or “I work in doggy daycare.” When I try to discuss it with my dad, he says he would be “disappointed because I like telling people you are a teacher”.

I know I have asked my own children about what they would like to do when they are grown up and maybe I've unintentionally shown more approval when they lean towards something professional, but I now realise that all I want is for them to be happy. So, how do I find the courage to just be me, without a label? And how do I instil this into my daughters?

Philippa's answer So, if I understand the question, the problem is not who you are with yourself – you'd be happy working as a dog walker or stacking shelves – it is how you identify yourself to others and the weighty problem of your dad's supply of small talk.

I'm imagining you working at the supermarket, taking on colleagues' problems. Or at doggy daycare worrying about a dog's fleas that his owners don't seem interested in. I can guess, in other words, you will be taking your work home, whatever it was, because you care, it's what you're like. I'm guessing you have a capacity to take on problems – probably quite efficiently – and that if you empty your head of some of them, you'd find others to fill up that headspace. We get into these habits that take awareness and willpower to shift.

Now, you could stay in a profession that does afford you satisfaction, but learn how to be boundaried with yourself so you bring less of the headspace aspects of it home. But perhaps you are more fed up with it than that,

and the only thing stopping you leaving is what other people might think.

You say you can't leave your job because your dad's small talk would run dry. That is the best non-reason I've ever heard (and I've heard a lot). Thinking about you chatting with your dad about the possibility of changing jobs is making me smile. I think this is probably because, whatever your mental load, you also have a sense of fun.

In terms of how others may see you, I reckon you get invited out a lot because people want you around as you are delightful and not because you are a professional

Small talk is big talk in disguise. It's asking: Are you friendly?

person. If you really want a less responsible job, sure give up the teaching, you've done your time and duty, you can have a new adventure. Your experience and work to date will not be wasted – it has made you what you are today. It can still inform your small talk.

Small talk is big talk in disguise. When we ask about the weather or what

someone's work is, what we are really saying is, “I'm friendly, are you friendly?” or “Can I get on with you?” but it's too weird to say that, so “What do you do?” remains our stock phrase. And it's not what we say in reply that matters – and I cannot stress this enough – but *how* we say it. I can imagine you at a party when you have given up teaching, being asked what you do and you replying something like, “I have the best job in the world. I've bought a jet washer and spend my days making people's patios as good as new. It's so satisfying, the only trouble is the work experience boy I've got working with me for a week is terribly unhappy as he is going through his first romantic breakup, I'm very worried about him...”

I wonder how many of us are doing responsible, professional jobs when we'd rather be, say, taking people's dogs for walkies. Not for financial reasons, but just because we worry what new people will think when we define ourselves in social situations.

Remember small talk is the big question of “Are you friendly, can I get on with you?” and all you have to be is friendly when you reply. If you get really stuck, you can go, “You first...” If they tell you they are a teacher and are getting bogged down with all the changing rules and requirements, I'm sure you'll be very sympathetic.

And how can you teach your own children to be happy? You can't. But if you accept them and their ideas as they are, you will be helping to instil confidence and a capacity for happiness. However, if your attitude is more: I'll accept you only if you are working towards a recognised, respectable profession and achieve that, well, maybe that might compromise their capacity for joy and I think you suspect as much. ■

➔ **Write to us:** If you have a question, send a brief email to askphilippa@observer.co.uk. To have your say on this week's column, go to observer.co.uk/ask-philippa

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