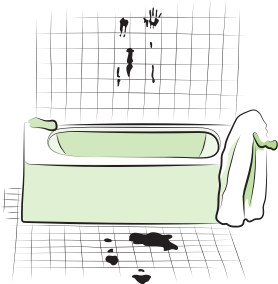


~~“A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me,” Ishmael reflects. “Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine.”~~

~~We know what this is like. We know about lonely people brought together by a contagiously effective brand of artistry—be it at the level of craft or oratory or viral meme-mongering—that serves tyrannical purposes. We’re less aware of methods for evading those purposes, but the BlackBerry commercial at least offers some clues. By revealing the likeness between the compulsive smartphone users of this century and *Moby-Dick’s* Ahab-following isolatoes, it clarifies the damage that can be done by art that joins us according to obsessive craving. But it also reminds us of the amity upheld by other artists, like that of the *Pequod’s* whalers. To investigate this further, to follow it into Melville’s novel itself, is to find traces of a grander consciousness, an expansive imagination that registers the various ways—harmful and helpful—in which people might come together.~~
—Adam Colman



Death and child’s play

Children dream up new uses for toys every day—a yo-yo that hypnotizes dogs! an easy-bake oven that tans or melts Barbie dolls!—but Frances Glessner Lee, millionaire heiress

to a farm-implement fortune, was fifty-two when she began transforming dollhouses into tools for serious forensics. Her *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*, a series of murder-scene dollhouse dioramas intended to train budding gumshoes in the 1930s and ’40s, asks aspiring detectives to think like children: to forget that the dolls are dolls and plunge into macabre games of make-believe based on real stories of, typically, suicide or murder. At 1:12 scale, Lee’s miniature crime scenes undo both the idealized setting propagated by dollhouses and—since victims are mostly housewives, prostitutes, and schoolgirls—the idealized representations of beauty propagated by dolls.

Lee, who had been denied a formal college education by her Victorian parents, crafted the first diorama after they (and her Harvard-educated brother) died, as if only then could she transcend the pressure to be a lady and pursue the male-dominated field of forensics. She was not, however, a total outsider whose creativity emerged suddenly and unbidden from her unconscious mind: Lee surrounded herself with experts, including George Burgess Magrath, Boston’s medical examiner and one of her brother’s friends from Harvard, whose frequent complaints to Lee about murder investigations botched by incompetent detectives and untrained coroners motivated her to reframe criminal investigation as a scientific process. Her inspiration to renovate dollhouses into learning tools for police began to take form when she was a child, compulsively reading Sherlock Holmes, playing with dolls,

and receiving a thorough education in the domestic arts.

To make the Nutshells, she applied this education subversively: she sewed and knitted clothes down to the dolls’ socks, wallpapered the rooms and added accurate blood spatters, and glazed and painted each doll with complexions and figures that varied based on expected decomposition levels. (She regularly accompanied detectives to crime scenes, taking notes on the bloating and skin discoloration of decaying corpses.) Lee approached the construction of each dollhouse the way a Renaissance master painter approached the composition process, and like they did, she had help. She hired a full-time carpenter and his son to build and furnish accurate dollhouses with shutters that opened and closed, working light switches and bulbs, and tiny keys that unlocked tiny doors. Each one cost as much to build as the average American house.

The Nutshells were crafted primarily with function instead of aesthetic pleasure in mind. They emphasize the pursuit of overlooked details. Lee wanted the viewer to find clues that would help the investigation, not necessarily solve the case at once. “The Red Bedroom,” for example, displays a bloodied ash-blond prostitute—Lee named her Marie—in a floral robe, crumpled on the floor near a closet door, her neck sliced and her head resting on a cardboard box. Her opened dresser drawers and suitcase suggest she’d been frantically packing at the time of her murder; a candy box, a jack-knife, a bloodied rag, a drinking glass with liquid still in it, and two empty

liquor bottles complete the scene. A smart detective viewing “The Red Bedroom” would examine the angle of the cut on Marie’s neck, review her blood-alcohol levels with the medical examiner, have the rag tested and the blood typed. Does it match Marie’s blood type or her boyfriend’s? In the statement accompanying “The Red Bedroom,” Marie’s boyfriend tells investigators: “We went to her room and sat smoking and drinking for a while. Marie sat in the big chair and got very drunk. Suddenly, without any warning, she grabbed my open jack-knife—I used it to cut the string on

the bottles—and ran into the closet and shut the door. When I opened the door, she was lying there just like that. I left immediately.” Is it a relevant omission that he never mentions the candy box?

The intensity of Lee’s attention to detail saves the dollhouses from pure sensationalism, turning her feminist twist on the sexist premise of the distressed damsel—or rather the dead one—into a complicated kind of art. By dramatizing females as victims, Lee fashioned herself as both victim and perpetrator. Ultimately, however, she remained in charge, not only by

choosing which crimes to stage but also by withholding their solutions: if her Nutshells quietly questioned the social and political landscape, they also forced law enforcement to face—and to playact with—gruesome crimes against women. Gruesome and, in an important sense, real: Lee crafted her scenarios from composites of stories of murders, accidental deaths, and suicides gleaned from an extensive library of field books and manuals, as well as from anecdotes related to her by dinner-party guests—homicide detectives, police officers, and medical examiners—over prime rib and cherries jubilee.

The legacy of the Nutshells has generally focused on their practicality, their function. Lee organized biannual weeklong seminars that used her Nutshells as instructional tools; she even founded Harvard’s Department of Legal Medicine and endowed its Forensics Department, including the donation of her dollhouses. Since shortly after her death, in 1962, eighteen of the nineteen existing Nutshells have sat encased in glass on the fourth floor of the Baltimore city morgue, where they continue to be used to train detectives (now men and women alike). Since October 2017, though, and until the end of January, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, is displaying all nineteen of them—in a show called *Murder Is Her Hobby*—highlighting not exactly the aesthetic pleasure they provoke, perhaps, but at least the creativity, in spirit and in craft, that brought them into being.

— Jeannie Vanasco

MICROINTERVIEW WITH
BEAR GRYLLS
PART V

BLVR: What’s the longest you’ve gone without eating?

BG: I think about eight days on a combat survival, escaping invasion, which we did in the British Special Forces, where we were being chased across a mountain by this hunter force. I think if you’ve never been without food for a couple of days it’s very hard to appreciate. It becomes like thirst. It becomes all-consuming. When you’re living off the land you’re going to be hungry, you’ve got to deal with it. And you see what people’s character is really like. You see what people are made of.

BLVR: How about killing animals? Can you recommend any trapping techniques?

BG: The great thing about snares and stuff is that you’re only limited by your imagination. Depends what you’ve got with you. They say you either mangle, strangle, or dangle. It’s either a weight falling on top—the mangle. Dangle: the spring snare goes around little squirrels and you whip it up into the air. Or you strangle: where the animal goes into a noose and strangles itself.

BLVR: Do you wear sunscreen on your survival adventures?

BG: Yeah, I do. I always start out with good sunscreen.★