

## Topics

# Puritans, Washingtons

## Winter Lambscape

This easy winter has brought out a kind of Puritan weather ethic, especially in the people who would never move to California or Florida because they think a rigorous climate braces the soul. The mild January pleased them for a while but as it went on, day after sunny day, it made them uneasy. It was too much of a good thing.

February came on cold and the temperatures stayed reassuringly below normal. But there was almost no snow. Farmers and reservoir keepers worried about dry, naked fields and poor runoffs; skiers, of course, worried about their non-sliding slopes. But the meteorological Calvinists were more profoundly concerned. Storms and blizzards beat at other parts of the country; why should they be living in a state of unearned grace?

Now breezy March is already here and winter may have blown its last chance to relieve their guilt. One of them, as she made a show of shoveling a meager dusting of snow the other day, saw dire alternatives. Either win-

ter would get worse, she said, or spring would be awful. But she tried to see a bright side: "March could be a disaster." And, depending on one's point of view, she could be right — whether winter remains a lamb or suddenly turns lion, to make up for its past good behavior.

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## What's Best for the Kids

The script is familiar: the breakup of a union, disillusionment, the fight for custody. But this wasn't Kramer vs. Kramer; it was the fight over Boston's Gilbert Stuart portraits of George and Martha Washington. Vows, now lost in the dust of filing cabinets, had united two worthy Boston institutions, the Athenaeum and the Museum of Fine Arts, for the purpose of sharing parts of the Athenaeum's art collection. The Stuart portraits, owned by the Athenaeum since 1831, had hung in the museum since 1876. It was a tranquil liaison of culture and convenience.

Enter the other party. Washington's National Portrait Gallery wooed the

Athenaeum to buy the pictures, saying they belonged in Washington anyway. Bitter accusations. "Save Our Stuarts!" became a rallying cry for Boston fund-raisers and political candidates. The Athenaeum pleaded that it needed the cash. The museum cried betrayal. The National Portrait Gallery countered with what it could do for George and Martha. And we weighed in with another helpful proposal: rather than have two sister cities at each other's throats, New York, halfway between, would be happy to provide a foster home.

To everyone's credit, the fracas has ended amicably. George and Martha will divide their time between Boston and Washington, starting at the National Portrait Gallery this spring. After three years, they'll move north to the museum, and so on. The compromise includes visiting rights for the public, and money for the Athenaeum. All that's needed is approval by the Massachusetts Probate Court. For Martha and George, as for so many other victims of contention, joint custody is happier than foster care.