

## Up Front: Lydia Davis

On our cover this week, Lydia Davis reviews John Ashbery's new translation of Rimbaud's "Illuminations."



*Illustration by Tina Berning: Lydia Davis*

Davis is well known for her extremely short, elliptical stories that read, sometimes, like deadpan Zen koans. Here's one, called "Collaboration With Fly," that consists of exactly one sentence: "I put that word on the page, but he added the apostrophe." Fans of Davis's fiction may be startled to learn that in her parallel career, as a translator of French literature, she has tackled wordier writers, including Proust and Flaubert, to great acclaim. (Davis's 2010 translation of "Madame Bovary" won a prize from the French-American Foundation last month.)

How does Davis approach translations? "A single work involves often hundreds of thousands of minute decisions," she told us via e-mail. "Many are inevitably compromises. The ideal translation would result in an English that perfectly replicated the original and at the same time read with as much natural vigor as though it had been born in English. But in reality the finished translation is likely to be more uneven — now eloquent, now pedestrian, now a perfect replication, now a little false to the original in meaning or rhythm or syntax or level of diction. A careful weighing of the many choices involved can nevertheless result in a wonderful translation. But great patience and of course great skill in writing are essential, not to speak of a good ear and a deep understanding of the original text."