

# *The* MANTELPIECE

Issue 18

Literary Magazine

December 2024







www.themantelpiece.org

## Contributors

*Lillian Heimisdottir* is a writer and poet residing in Barcelona.

*Eleanor Jiménez* is a writer and professor of classical and contemporary literature from Barcelona ([web](#)).

*Graham Foster* is a playwright and short story writer from Edinburgh, who studied Creative Writing and Theatre. His work, often exploring themes of isolation and resilience, has been performed and published internationally ([web](#)).

*Mikkel Sørensen* is a Danish novelist and essayist whose writing delves into existential themes, isolation, and the nuances of human relationships. His fiction is widely read and discussed ([web](#)).

*Evelyn M. Smith* is a short-story author known for her introspective explorations of the human experience. Her work has been featured in numerous literary journals and anthologies, earning her recognition for its sharp prose and emotional depth. Smith's writing is characterized by its careful attention to language. ([web](#))

*Mateo Lopez* is a Colombian poet and translator who focuses on contemporary and historical Latin American poetry ([web](#)).

*Isla Chang* is a Chinese-Korean poet, whose writing explores migration, generational memory, and language. She has studied creative writing and worked in international literary communities ([web](#)).

*Freja Lindholm* is a Finnish-Danish cultural historian who examines folklore, nationalism, and social narratives. She writes and lectures on the intersection of history and modern identity ([web](#)).

*Vivian Carter* is a British poet and translator who studied literature and specializes in postcolonial themes. Her poetry and essays examine language, memory, and the shifting nature of identity ([web](#)).

*Lena Whitmore* is a historian and journalist from Chicago who focuses on political and cultural movements of the 20th century. She has contributed to various academic journals and general-interest publications ([web](#)).

*Erik N. Patel* is a writer and digital nomad whose work has appeared in various literary magazines. Constantly on the move, he draws inspiration from his extensive travels, weaving the landscapes, cultures, and people he encounters into his writing ([web](#)).

*Heimir Steinarsson* is an Icelandic typographer and linguist.

Coverphoto: [PálmiG](#) / Adobe Stock

## Table of Contents

### Editorial

Lillian Heimisdottir 4 Winter Wonderland

### Literature

Eleanor Jiménez 5 Breaking the Line

### Fiction

Graham Foster 6 The Collector of Lost Causes

Mikkel Sørensen 10 Something Like Love

Evelyn M. Smith 20 The Quiet Weight of a  
Sunday Morning

### Poetry

Mateo Lopez 9 How the Earth Knows Me

Isla Chang 13 Inheritance

Vivian Carter 24 The Last Agreement

### Travel

Freja Lindholm 14 The Art of Being a Stranger

### Essay

Lena Whitmore 22 Train Your Brain for Happiness

### Commentary

Erik N. Patel 25 Why I Can't Stop Subscribing  
to Things I Don't Need

### The Light Side

Heimir Steinarsson 27 Online Enthrallment

The Mantelpiece (ISSN 2988-9405) © www.themantelpiece.org

Editor: Lillian Heimisdottir (lillian@themantelpiece.org)

Publisher: Markmal ehf., Hverafold 1-3, PO-Box 12066, 132 Reykjavik, ICELAND

Magazine layout and webpage design: Heimir Steinarsson

Submissions: The Mantelpiece is open to unsolicited submissions of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. We consider all submissions for both our website and online magazine. Please familiarize yourself with our submission guidelines at [www.themantelpiece.org/submissions](http://www.themantelpiece.org/submissions) and send your work to [submissions@themantelpiece.org](mailto:submissions@themantelpiece.org)  
The Mantelpiece - Literary Magazine. Issue 18, December 2024. Copyright 2024 The Mantelpiece. All artwork and literature contained in this publication are copyright 2024 to their respective creators. The ideas and opinions expressed within belong to the respective authors and artists and do not necessarily reflect those of the editors. None of the contents of this publication may be reprinted without the permission of the individual authors or artists.

# Winter Wonderland

**A**s the last leaves surrender their vibrant hues and winter spreads its crystalline blanket across the land, the world transforms into a realm of silence and stillness—a blank page awaiting the pen of creation. The snow-covered landscape, often heralded as a “winter wonderland,” holds a profound connection to the realm of literature. Beneath its icy surface lies an invitation to reflection, storytelling, and an exploration of the human condition. In this wintry canvas, writers and readers alike may find parallels to the literary craft, where absence births possibility, and simplicity conceals profound depth.

Winter’s landscape, shorn of its foliage and cloaked in white, evokes the unblemished page that stares back at a writer—vast, daunting, and brimming with latent potential. Just as the first snowfall transforms a chaotic, earthy terrain into a serene expanse, so too does the first word breathe life into the silence of a blank sheet.

This parallel offers solace to creators who grapple with the fear of starting. In both cases, the blankness is not a void but a vessel, a reservoir of infinite possibilities. The stark simplicity of snow-covered fields reminds us that the absence of clutter does not signify emptiness. Rather, it is an invitation to imagine, to layer meaning, and to construct a narrative where there was once nothing.

In winter, sound takes on a different character. Snow muffles the cacophony of the world, creating a hush that invites introspection. This quietude is akin to the stillness that surrounds a writer in the solitude of their craft. It is in this quiet that the seeds of stories often take root, nourished by the fertile soil of memory, observation, and imagination.

The works of authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Jack London capture the essence of winter not just as a season but as a state of mind. Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” juxtaposes

the brutality of Russian winters with the inner lives of his characters, using the landscape as both a setting and a metaphor for resilience and transformation. London’s “To Build a Fire,” meanwhile, portrays the unforgiving nature of winter as a test of human endurance, emphasizing the frailty of man against nature’s indifference.

In these stories, winter is more than a backdrop; it is an active participant in the narrative, shaping characters and events alike. Similarly, literature invites us to explore the unspoken, to confront the silences within ourselves, and to find meaning in the spaces between words. The reflective nature of winter mirrors the introspection that great stories demand.

**“As we step into this winter season, let us embrace its silence and its stories.”**

While a snow-covered landscape may appear monochromatic, closer examination reveals subtle variations in tone, texture, and light. A similar complexity exists in literature, where a seemingly simple narrative often conceals intricate layers of meaning. In both cases, the beauty lies in the details.

Consider the works of poets like Robert Frost, whose verses often evoke the winter landscape to explore universal themes of loneliness, choice, and mortality. In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Frost’s speaker contemplates the allure of the quiet, snow-filled woods, juxtaposed against the responsibilities of life. The snow becomes a symbol of both peace and isolation, its duality mirroring the tension within the speaker’s soul.

The metaphor of snow as a blank page extends here as well. Just as a writer im-

bues a story with meaning, the viewer of a snow-covered field projects their own emotions onto the landscape. Is it a scene of serene beauty or desolate emptiness? The answer lies not in the snow itself but in the eye of the beholder, much like how a reader’s interpretation brings a story to life.

Winter, for all its cold and stillness, is not an end but a prelude. Beneath the snow, seeds lie dormant, waiting for spring’s warmth to coax them into growth. This cyclical nature of seasons mirrors the creative process, where periods of dormancy and rest are essential for renewal.

In the literary world, the act of writing often follows a similar rhythm. A story may lay untouched for months, much like a field buried under snow, before it is revisited and brought to fruition. Writers, like farmers, understand the necessity of patience, of allowing ideas to germinate unseen before they are ready to bloom.

This theme of renewal is beautifully captured in Edith Wharton’s “Ethan Frome,” where the harshness of a New England winter becomes a crucible for the characters’ desires and disappointments. The snow, in its unyielding presence, forces them to confront the choices that have led to their stasis. Yet, even in this bleak setting, there is a glimmer of hope—the possibility of change, however distant.

For writers and readers, winter’s wonderland is both a metaphor and a muse. Its snow-covered expanse speaks to the beauty of beginnings, the necessity of reflection, and the complexity of simplicity. It reminds us that creation often arises from stillness and that even the most barren landscapes hold the promise of growth.

As we step into this winter season, let us embrace its silence and its stories. Let us see in the snow not just a covering but a canvas, not just an ending but a beginning. And let us, like the writers before us, find inspiration in the world’s blank page and fill it with meaning, one word at a time.

□ L.H.

# Breaking the Line

## The Beat Poets and Their Legacy

Eleanor Jiménez

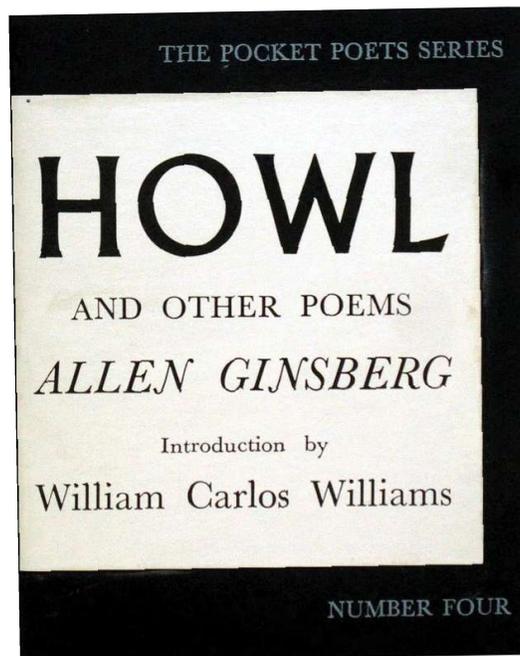
“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...” These iconic opening lines from Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* capture the heart of Beat Poetry—its raw energy, its fierce rebellion, and its rejection of the status quo. Emerging in the postwar years of the 1940s and 1950s, the Beat movement was a response to the suffocating conformity and materialism that characterized mid-century America.

A new generation of poets rejected the literary conventions of the time, embracing spontaneity, emotional rawness, and a desire to break free from societal constraints. The Beats, often associated with mysticism, non-conformity, and political resistance, reshaped the American literary landscape, and their influence extended far beyond the confines of poetry to music, art, and social movements. This article delves into the origins, key figures, major themes, and lasting legacy of Beat Poetry, tracing its impact on modern literature and its profound influence on countercultural movements.

### The Origins and Context of the Beat Movement

The Beat movement emerged in the aftermath of World War II, a time when America was experiencing economic prosperity but also widespread social repression. The 1950s were marked by the rise of the middle class, conformity, consumerism, and a pervasive fear of communism during the Cold War. At the same time, a growing sense of disillusionment simmered beneath the surface, as many young intellectuals and

artists rejected the shallow materialism of American society. Among these dissidents were the writers who would become the core of the Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and others. Their work was defined by a desire to break free from the rigid structures of both American society and traditional literary form.



The Beats were born in the urban centers of the East Coast, particularly New York City, where Kerouac, Ginsberg, and their peers met at Columbia University. Their interactions were informed by a shared sense of disillusionment and a hunger for new ways to experience and express the world. Influenced by jazz, Eastern philosophies, and experimental forms of literature, the Beat poets developed a

style that broke away from conventional poetic structures. The Beats soon found a receptive audience on the West Coast, particularly in San Francisco, where the 1955 reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery became a landmark moment in American literary history, marking the public arrival of the Beat Generation.

### The Key Figures of Beat Poetry

#### Allen Ginsberg: The Revolutionary Voice

One of the most prominent figures in Beat Poetry, Allen Ginsberg’s work captured the anger and defiance of a generation. His groundbreaking poem *Howl* became a rallying cry for those who felt alienated by mainstream society. With its unflinching exploration of sexuality, mental illness, and societal oppression, *Howl* challenged conventional norms and pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in American literature. The poem’s explicit language and radical themes led to a landmark obscenity trial in 1957, which ultimately became a defining moment in the fight for artistic freedom.

Ginsberg’s work often intertwined personal experience with political activism, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, anti-war movements, and environmentalism. His voice, loud and unapologetic, became synonymous with the rebellious spirit of the Beat Generation.

#### Jack Kerouac: The Father of Spontaneous Prose

Jack Kerouac, often considered the heart and soul of the Beat Generation, was both a poet and a novelist. His novel *On the Road* (1957) became a defining work of

the era, chronicling the restless wanderings of its protagonist across the American landscape. Kerouac's writing, with its rapid, free-flowing prose, embodied the very spirit of the Beats. Known for his concept of "spontaneous prose," Kerouac advocated for writing without revision, allowing thought to spill onto the page without constraint. This method, inspired in part by jazz improvisation, mirrored the

While Burroughs' work was often darker and more experimental than that of his peers, his influence on later avant-garde writers and postmodernists is undeniable.

### Other Notable Figures in the Beat Movement

While Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs were the central figures of the Beat Generation, many others played crucial roles in shaping the movement. Gregory Corso, for example, brought humor and lyricism to his work, while Diane di Prima provided a strong feminist voice, addressing issues of gender and politics. Gary Snyder, influenced by Zen Buddhism and environmentalism, brought a spiritual and ecological dimension to the movement, embracing the interconnectedness of nature and humanity in his poetry. Anne Waldman, a later figure, continued to carry the Beat sensibility into the 1970s and beyond, helping to sustain the movement's influence into subsequent decades.

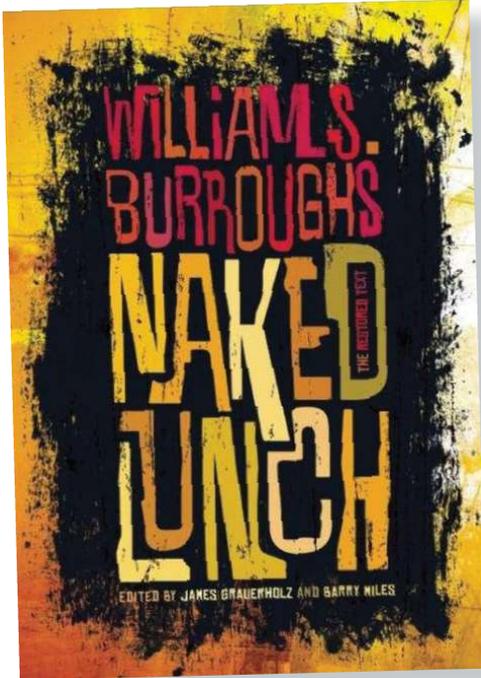
### Rebellion Against the Mainstream

At the heart of Beat Poetry lies a rejection of the dominant culture. The Beats criticized the materialism, conservatism, and political repression that defined 1950s America. In works like Ginsberg's *America*, the poet mocked the hypocrisy of American society and exposed the struggles of those left behind in the wake of postwar prosperity. For the Beats, rebellion was not just a political act; it was a creative act, one that challenged the very structures of language and society.

### Spiritual Exploration and Mysticism

The Beat poets were deeply influenced by Eastern philosophies, particularly Zen Buddhism and Hinduism, which offered them a profound escape from the rigid and often oppressive structures of Western thought. These traditions, with their emphasis on inner peace, mindfulness, and liberation from ego, provided the Beats with a framework to explore the deeper, more mystical aspects of life that mainstream Western culture often ignored or dismissed. For the Beats, spiritual exploration was not just about religious practice—it was an essential part of their quest to transcend societal limitations and experience a more authentic connection with themselves and the world around them.

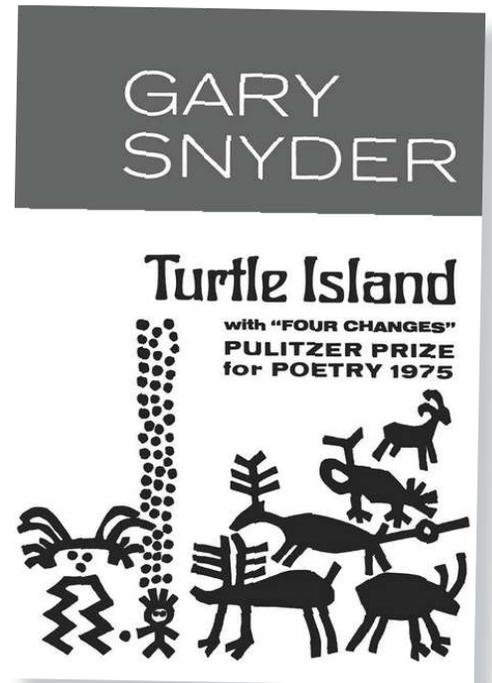
Ginsberg, for instance, was heavily influenced by his encounters with Eastern teachings, and his poem *Sunflower Sutra* embodies his attempt to reconcile the spiritual with the material world. In this work, Ginsberg reflects on the nature of existence, using the sunflower as a symbol of transcendence and spiritual awakening. Similarly, William S. Burroughs and Gary Snyder embraced aspects of Eastern mysticism, each in their unique way. Snyder's poetry, much of it rooted in his study of Zen Buddhism, reflects a deep connection to nature, where he seeks to transcend the human ego and experience the world as a part of a greater, interconnected whole. The Beats' spiritual journeys were marked by an urgent desire to break free from the disillusionment of postwar America, a country that seemed increasingly alienated from its own spiritual roots. For the Beats, spirituality became a vital means of personal liberation, as they



ethos of Beat poetry—an emphasis on raw, unfiltered expression. Though primarily known for his prose, Kerouac's poetry, including *Mexico City Blues*, incorporated the rhythms of jazz, making his work both lyrical and spontaneous.

### William S. Burroughs: The Experimental Visionary

While Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac are often seen as the faces of the Beat Generation, William S. Burroughs was a crucial figure in the movement's development. Best known for his novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), Burroughs pushed the boundaries of narrative and language, embracing a fragmented, non-linear style that broke with traditional storytelling conventions. Burroughs was deeply influenced by his personal struggles with addiction, and his work often explored themes of paranoia, control, and the dehumanizing effects of modern life. His innovative "cut-up" technique—where he would randomly rearrange texts to create new meanings—further revolutionized the way language could be used in literature.



sought enlightenment in a world that felt ever more fractured and disconnected from nature.

### Sexual and Personal Liberation

In an era where the discussion of sexuality was often taboo, the Beat poets were at the forefront of exploring themes of sexual freedom and personal liberation, challenging both the literary and societal conventions that sought to restrict these topics. They were not only pioneers in discussing homosexuality, bisexuality, and non-traditional relationships, but they

## JACK KEROUAC

### ON THE ROAD



also pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in the larger social sphere. Ginsberg's *Howl*—with its candid portrayal of homosexuality, drug use, and mental anguish—was a revolutionary act that brought these deeply personal experiences into the public consciousness, making space for marginalized voices.

Ginsberg's embrace of his own queerness in his writing was a radical departure from the cultural norms of the time, which were steeped in heteronormative ideals and suppressed alternative sexualities. Beyond just a celebration of sexual freedom, the Beats were concerned with broader questions of personal liberation. Their works reflected an insistence on the right to live authentically and without shame, free from the expectations and constraints imposed by societal norms.

For them, liberation was not just about challenging sexual conventions; it was about the freedom to live a life of truth, guided by one's own desires and experiences rather than by conformity to the pressures of society. Their exploration of non-traditional relationships also extended to a deeper critique of the structures of power that governed social behavior, advocating for a world where individuals could live openly, without fear of judgment or repression. By speaking openly about their own struggles with identity and societal rejection, the Beat poets gave voice to the marginalized and the oppressed, making their works essential in the broader struggle for freedom, equality, and the right to personal self-expression.

## The Influence of Jazz and Spontaneity

Jazz was a key influence on Beat Poetry, especially in terms of rhythm and improvisation. Just as jazz musicians would create music on the spot, Beat poets sought to capture the raw energy of spontaneous thought. Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* mirrored the structure of jazz solos, while Ginsberg's *Kaddish* unfolded in long, flowing lines that mimicked the improvisational quality of jazz. This rhythmic and musical quality helped define Beat poetry as a genre that was both emotionally raw and profoundly free.

## The Beat Poets' Influence on Bob Dylan

One of the most profound influences of the Beat Poets was felt in the world of music, particularly through Bob Dylan. The folk icon was deeply inspired by the work of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and the broader Beat movement, incorporating their themes of rebellion, spiritual exploration, and personal liberation into his own lyrics. Ginsberg and Dylan shared a mutual admiration, with Ginsberg famously attending Dylan's performances and the two poets exchanging ideas about literature and music.

Dylan's early songs, such as *Blowin' in the Wind* and *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, reflected the same sense of urgency and desire for social change that marked Beat poetry. Dylan's imagery, his free-verse lyrics, and his rejection of mainstream conventions in favor of a more spontaneous, poetic form owe much to the influence of the Beats. Indeed, much of Dylan's impact on the cultural landscape can be traced back to the same impulse that drove the Beat Generation: a desire to challenge societal norms and create art that spoke to the soul of a generation.

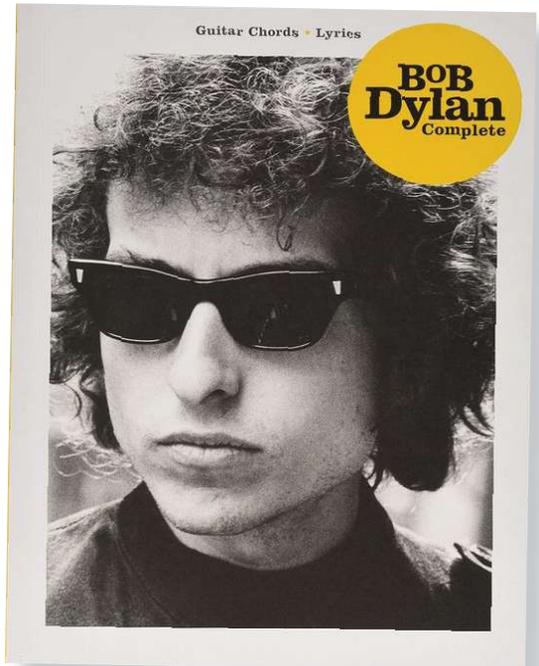
## Cultural Impact and Legacy

The Beat Generation's influence reached far beyond poetry, shaping the course of American literature and contributing to the rise of the 1960s counterculture. Their rejection of traditional values laid the groundwork for the hippie movement, anti-war protests, and civil rights activism. Music, in particular, absorbed the energy and spirit of the Beats, with figures like Bob Dylan, The Beatles, and later punk bands embracing the same ethos of rebellion and artistic freedom.

In literature, the Beats paved the way for the confessional poets of the 1960s

and 1970s, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Their exploration of the personal and the political also influenced the spoken word movement and the rise of slam poetry in the 1980s and 1990s. Their innovative approach to language and form continues to resonate with contemporary writers and poets, including postmodern authors like Thomas Pynchon and Hunter S. Thompson.

Even today, the spirit of Beat Poetry endures in contemporary poetry and music. Artists like Kendrick Lamar and spoken word performers like Saul Williams



continue to draw on the same traditions of social engagement and rhythmic dynamism that defined the Beat movement. Hip-hop, with its powerful spoken word elements, echoes the same urgency and desire for change that fueled the Beats.

The Beat Generation was more than just a literary movement; it was a cultural revolution. Through their rejection of convention, their embrace of spontaneity, and their fearless exploration of sexuality, politics, and spirituality, the Beats transformed the landscape of American poetry and influenced generations of artists across various mediums. Their work continues to resonate with those who challenge societal norms and seek unfiltered self-expression. Whether through the pages of *Howl*, the songs of Bob Dylan, or the rhythms of contemporary hip-hop, the legacy of the Beat poets remains alive and well, proving that poetry, above all, is a space for rebellion, truth, and the exploration of the human soul. □

# The Collector of Lost Causes

Graham Foster



There were few invitations as mysterious as those from Maximilian von Rehn. They arrived in thick, cream-colored envelopes, sealed with a wax insignia that bore no family crest, only the impression of an open palm. Those who received them—disgraced scholars, forgotten artists, researchers whose theories had been dismissed—rarely spoke of their visits. Some never returned at all.

I had never expected to receive such an invitation. I was, at best, a middling journalist for a cultural magazine that prided itself on long, meandering essays that only academics and the occasional eccentric read. But when the envelope arrived, I knew I could not refuse.

Von Rehn's estate lay deep in the Bavarian countryside, a gray and ivy-choked manor surrounded by mist-covered hills. The man himself, when I met him in his dimly lit study, was both younger and older than I expected. His frame was thin but imposing, his hair silver but his eyes keen and restless. He studied me for a mo-

ment before speaking.

"You are wondering why you are here," he said, his voice smooth, measured. "I imagine you have done some research on me."

"There's little to find," I admitted. "You inherited your wealth and disappeared from public life decades ago. Some say you fund artists and intellectuals, but there's no record of your patronage."

He smiled faintly. "You see, Miss Hartmann, I do not fund success. I fund failure."

I must have looked confused, for he gestured to the shelves lining the room. They were filled not with classics or first editions, but with obscure tomes—books whose names I vaguely recognized from footnotes, works dismissed as irrelevant or incoherent. On his walls hung unfinished paintings, compositions frozen mid-stroke, sculptures with blank, featureless faces.

"These are the works of those who did not succeed," von Rehn continued. "Brilliant minds who chased theories deemed untenable. Composers whose symphonies no audience wished to hear. Architects whose blueprints could never be built. I have spent my life ensuring that they could continue their work, even if the world had no place for them."

I felt a shiver of something—admiration? Apprehension? "Why?" I asked.

For the first time, von Rehn hesitated. He exhaled, his fingers tapping against the armrest of his chair. "Because the world is blind," he said at last. "Because it has a cruel way of deciding what is worth pursuing and what must be discarded. Because I have seen greatness die in obscurity, and I refuse to let it."

I was given a room in the manor to stay the night. Despite the warmth of the fireplace, the house felt impossibly cold. That evening, I wandered the halls, exploring his strange museum of the forgotten. In a grand salon, I found a pianist hunched over a dusty grand piano, playing notes so discordant they made my skin prickle. In a small library, a woman sat surrounded by stacks of handwritten manuscripts, scribbling furiously in a language I did not recognize.

It was in the west wing that I found something truly unsettling: a portrait of von Rehn himself, but painted decades ago. It should have depicted a younger man, but the face in the painting was identical to the one I had met today. The same sharp features, the same silver hair.

A voice behind me made me startle. "It never ages."

I turned to see a man—tall, gaunt, with hollowed eyes—watch-

ing me. “None of them do,” he added. “Not the books, not the music, not the people.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He tilted his head, studying me as if deciding how much to say. “Von Rehn’s patrons never succeed. And they never leave.”

A cold unease settled in my stomach. “That’s not true. Many have left.”

“Have they?” His voice was almost pitying. “Tell me, Miss Hartmann, have you ever spoken to someone who left?”

I had not. I had only heard the rumors. The unease deepened.

That night, I dreamt of labyrinthine corridors, of whispers seeping through the walls, of unfinished music playing endlessly in the distance. When I awoke, the candle in my room had burned to nothing, and I felt as though something had watched me in the dark.

At breakfast, von Rehn was as composed as ever. “I hope you will write about what you have seen here,” he said. “But be warned: few believe in lost causes.”

I left soon after, but something followed me. In the weeks that came, I found myself haunted by the manor’s relics. The discordant piano notes crept into my dreams. The unfinished manuscripts lingered in my thoughts. And then there were the letters—unsigned invitations, arriving in thick cream envelopes, sealed with an open palm.

I never opened them. I burned them, one by one.

But deep inside, I knew it was only a matter of time before I returned.

As months passed, I found myself drawn into a peculiar restlessness. My own writing began to falter. I would start essays and abandon them midway, convinced of their inadequacy. The meticulous research I once prided myself on now seemed irrelevant, overshadowed by the unsettling certainty that there were greater truths hidden beyond my grasp—truths von Rehn understood.

I began to track down others who had received his invitation. Many were impossible to locate, their names reduced to echoes in academic circles or whispers in artistic enclaves. The few I did find had withdrawn from public life, their eyes shadowed with an exhaustion I could not explain.

One, a mathematician named Dr. Ulrich Bauer, agreed to meet me in a secluded café in Vienna. He had been young when he received von Rehn’s patronage, filled with promise and ambition. But now, he was hollowed out, speaking in murmurs and half-thoughts.

“He doesn’t just collect failures,” Bauer said, his fingers trembling over his untouched cup of coffee. “He ensures they remain failures.”

“What do you mean?” I pressed.

“He finds those on the brink of greatness—those who might change the world in some way. And then he... redirects them. Funds them just enough to keep them working, but never enough to let them break through. He keeps them trapped in their own potential, forever reaching but never grasping.”

The thought chilled me. “But why?”

Bauer shook his head. “Because he believes true genius is meant to suffer. That the world is not ready for what we might create. Or perhaps... he simply enjoys the control.”

I left the café feeling as though a door had closed behind me. Von Rehn had chosen me for a reason, but I no longer wished to know what it was.

The letters continued to arrive. And no matter how many I burned, I knew: one day, I would answer. □

# How the Earth Knows Me

Mateo Lopez

The river does not ask my name,  
but it knows the weight of me,  
the way my ankles hesitate in the cold,  
the way my hands skim its surface,  
not searching, just remembering.

I walk where the pines lean in close,  
where the wind braids itself through the branches,  
and I swear they whisper—  
not words, but something older,  
something that shifts inside my ribs  
like a stone turned smooth by time.

The ocean knows my voice,  
even when I do not speak.  
It calls me by the pull in my chest,  
by the way my breath unspools in its rhythm,  
in and out, in and out,  
like I am only another wave  
returning, retreating,  
never asking why.

The sky holds me in its open palms,  
lets me scatter myself like birds,  
lets me dissolve into the hush of dusk,  
the slow, amber swallowing of the sun.

And the earth, beneath all of it,  
carries me without question—  
lets me press my body against its skin,  
lets me listen to its quiet,  
and in its silence,  
I hear my own name.

# The Art of Being a Stranger

## A Journey Through Thailand

Freja Lindholm



Photo: sahachat / Adobe Stock

**T**ravel is, at its core, an invitation to become a stranger. The very act of stepping into a foreign land means momentarily shedding the identities, routines, and comforts of home. Yet, for all the excitement that comes with discovery, there is a unique kind of strangeness in being an outsider—an

unsettling awareness that, despite the new sights, sounds, and experiences around you, you are still somehow separated from the rhythm of the place, a visitor who does not fully belong.

It's not just the unfamiliar language or the new customs that make a place strange, but the subtle feeling of displacement—an awareness that you don't fully belong.

You move through a world not quite your own, where every glance, gesture, and conversation is shaped by the fact that you are foreign.

In Thailand, this feeling of strangeness runs deep. The vibrant streets of Bangkok, with their neon lights and constant movement, feel both exhilarating and alien. The aromas of sizzling street food—



*Vibrant chaos on water! Experience the sights, sounds, and flavors of Damnoen Saduak Floating Market—where culture and commerce flow together!*

spicy noodles, grilled meats, and tropical fruits—fill the air, luring me in with their warmth. But amidst this sensory overload, I feel the weight of my foreignness. Despite the city’s welcoming energy, a quiet but unmistakable recognition follows me everywhere: I am a stranger here. This duality—being both invisible and hyper-visible—is where I begin to understand what it truly means to be a stranger.

### The Tension of Observation

Arriving in Thailand, the world feels charged with unfamiliarity. The streets of Bangkok are a vibrant chaos: tuk-tuks zoom past, their drivers calling out to potential passengers; the air is thick with the sound of people negotiating, laughing, and calling out greetings. Bright neon signs compete for attention, while the wafting scent of sizzling food drifts through the air. The atmosphere is electric, alive with movement and sound, yet all of it feels just beyond my reach.

I watch the locals, who seem to move effortlessly through this world—like dancers who know every step. There is a

fluidity in their movements, an ease in their interactions, as though they belong here in a way I never will. They navigate the streets with purpose, their presence a part of the city’s heartbeat. Meanwhile, I am a foreigner in this place, unsure of how to fit into this intricate rhythm.



*Welcome to paradise—where turquoise waters meet golden sands in the heart of Thailand!*

In these first moments, I am a passive observer—watching, yet never quite participating. The city moves around me, and I, in turn, move through it, but I do so with a sense of distance. There is something strange about being so surrounded by life, yet feeling so separate from it. It is not discomfort exactly, but a deep awareness that I do not yet belong here. My presence is both invisible and conspicuous, an outsider’s paradox.

### The Language Barrier— More Than Just Words

One of the first challenges I face in Thailand is the language barrier. Thai, with its tonal intricacies and complex syllables, is a world apart from the languages I know. I struggle to pronounce basic greetings, fumbling over “sawasdee,” the Thai word for “hello.” The effort feels clumsy, the sounds foreign to my mouth. I am acutely aware of my own limitations. My inability to communicate with ease marks me as a stranger, a visitor who must navigate the world without the fluency that makes connection possible.

Yet, it is here that I begin to understand that language is more than just words. It’s about gestures, expressions, and silence. Thai culture values politeness above all else, and even without words, there is an unspoken language of respect that flows through every interaction. The wai, the traditional greeting where the palms are pressed together in a prayer-like gesture,



Photo: tampatira / Adobe Stock

*Bangkok Nights: The electric buzz of Yaowarat Road, where neon lights, street food, and the iconic tuk-tuk create a symphony of city life..*

speaks volumes about the culture’s emphasis on respect, humility, and the acknowledgment of social boundaries. The wai is more than just a greeting—it’s a delicate reminder of the space between us.

I attempt to replicate the wai, trying to mirror the elegance of the gesture, but it feels awkward at first. My fingers don’t align as they should, and my bow lacks the grace that the locals achieve with ease. But with time, I begin to understand the meaning behind it—not just the form, but the intention. It is not a mere formality; it is a gesture of genuine respect, a recognition of the differences between individuals, and a way of maintaining harmony.

As I learn to navigate this unspoken language, I realize that communication in Thailand goes far beyond words. It’s in the way people smile at one another, in the way they bow their heads when they offer gratitude, in the way silence speaks volumes where words are not needed. Being a stranger here means learning not just to speak the language, but to interpret the world through a different lens—one that is shaped by gestures, politeness, and the subtleties of human connection.

**The Paradox of Being Seen and Unseen**

There is a curious paradox that accompanies being a stranger in Thailand: the feeling of being both seen and unseen. On the one hand, I am just another tourist, blending into the throngs of foreigners who crowd the streets of Bangkok. I am part of the scenery, a fleeting presence in a city teeming with visitors. But at the same time, I cannot escape the feeling of being observed—of being watched with curiosity, sometimes with a friendly smile, sometimes with a more distant gaze.

In a small market, I try to purchase fruit. The vendor looks up at me, her eyes briefly meeting mine. There is no overt curiosity in the way she greets me. And yet, I know that I am being assessed—my foreignness marked in a glance. It is not a harsh judgment, but rather a quiet acknowledgment that I do not belong in the same way she does. Her smile is warm, but it is not the kind of smile that invites intimacy. It is the smile of a person who understands the social distance between us.

This tension of being both seen and unseen is a constant undercurrent in

my time in Thailand. I am aware of my presence in the way people glance at me, but I am also part of the larger crowd, just another stranger passing through. I begin to realize that this duality is not a negative experience. It is a recognition of my status as an outsider—and that is something to embrace, not resist.

**The Culture of Politeness—Masks and Authenticity**

One of the most striking aspects of Thai culture is its emphasis on politeness. This is a society built on maintaining harmony, where conflict is avoided, and respect is paramount. The Thai concept of “saving face” governs social interactions, and this creates a delicate dance of politeness and distance. There is a social mask that people wear—a mask that allows for interaction without intrusion, respect without closeness.

In my interactions, I see this mask in action. When I speak with locals, I am always met with a politeness that is both welcoming and carefully restrained. The smiles are genuine, but they are also guarded, as though they acknowledge



Photo: ImageIn / Adobe Stock

*Thai village nestled between lush greenery and calm waters. Tranquil tides, wooden stilt houses, and the gentle rhythm of nature create a charming scene.*

the boundaries between us. I am treated with kindness, but there is an underlying awareness that I am a visitor, a stranger who must respect the customs and rituals of this place without overstepping.

This cultural politeness becomes a form of connection, a way of bridging the gap between foreigner and local without disrupting the natural order of things. It is not a mask of falseness, but one of mutual respect. Over time, I begin to understand that this politeness is not an obstacle to genuine connection but a means of preserving harmony in a society where personal space and social boundaries are deeply valued.

I begin to appreciate the grace with which the locals navigate this delicate balance. The wai, the smiles, the soft tones of speech—all of these are part of the social fabric that binds people together in a way that is both inclusive and respectful of difference. Being a stranger in Thailand means understanding that intimacy is not always found in closeness, but in mutual respect and the subtle recognition of boundaries.

### **Immersion and Adaptation— The Changing Nature of Being a Stranger**

Over time, the strangeness begins to fade. I start to recognize familiar faces in the market, learn to navigate the streets without looking at a map, and adapt to the pace of life in a way that feels natural. The awkwardness of being a stranger recedes, replaced by a sense of belonging—though never fully, never completely. I learn the art of being a stranger not as something to overcome, but as something to embrace.

There is a certain fluidity in this process of adaptation. I am still very much a foreigner, still learning the language, still making mistakes. But the discomfort of being an outsider lessens as I begin to understand the nuances of Thai life. I don't need to be fully integrated to appreciate the beauty of this place. I am still a stranger, but I am no longer an alien.

In embracing this fluidity, I realize that the essence of being a stranger lies in the ongoing process of discovery—of learning, observing, and participating. The

more I adapt to Thai life, the more I realize that being a stranger is not a state to escape, but a dynamic state of being.

### **The Enduring Art of Being a Stranger**

In Thailand, I learned that being a stranger is not a problem to solve but an experience to embrace. It is a process of continual observation and adaptation, of learning to navigate the spaces between cultures with humility and respect. The art of being a stranger is about understanding that you may never fully belong, but that does not diminish your ability to connect with a place and its people.

Through my time in Thailand, I came to appreciate that strangeness is not something to resist but something to explore. In the end, being a stranger allowed me to see the world with fresh eyes, to engage with it in ways that I might never have if I had come as anything other than an outsider. And perhaps that is the greatest gift of all—to experience a world not as one who knows it, but as one who is open to discovering it. □

# Something Like Love

Mikkel Sørensen



**D**ana lights the last of the candles and steps back to look at the table. Two plates, two glasses, a bottle of wine breathing near the center. She'd never been the type to fuss over details, but tonight felt like it called for something extra.

She checks her phone. 7:53 p.m. A message from Mike: Be there in five.

She exhales, smoothing down the front of her sweater. She doesn't want to feel nervous, but it's been a while since she's had someone over. There had been other dates, sure, the kind that ended at restaurant tables with polite smiles and promises to text. But this was different. She'd invited him here, into her home, into her space. That meant something, even if she wasn't sure what yet.

Outside, a car pulls up. She listens to the

engine cut, the driver's door shut. A few seconds later, the buzzer sounds.

"Come on up," she says into the intercom, then steps to the door to wait.

Mike is taller than she remembers, or maybe it's just the way he stands under the hallway light. He's wearing a dark jacket over a button-down shirt, holding a paper bag in one hand.

"Hey," he says, offering a small smile. "Hope I'm not late."

"No, you're fine." Dana steps aside, gesturing him in. "Come in."

He holds up the bag. "I brought dessert. Not sure what you like, so I went with something safe—cheesecake."

Dana smiles. "That works."

She takes it from him and sets it on the counter. He shrugs off his jacket, and she

catches the scent of something faint—cologne, maybe. It's warm, woody. She likes it.

They settle into easy conversation as she serves the food. Mike compliments the meal, and Dana waves it off, but she's pleased. They talk about work—his job in construction management, hers at the dental office. They touch on their kids. Mike has a daughter, twenty-three, who lives in another state. Dana has two, both boys, one in college and the other working somewhere out west.

Between bites, Mike tells a story about his second wife. How she once left him standing outside in the rain, suitcases at his feet.

"Just like that?" Dana asks.

"Just like that." He shakes his head, laughing, but there's something in his face that looks tired. "I stood there for a while, thinking maybe she'd come back out. Say she didn't mean it. But she didn't."

Dana nods. She doesn't tell him about the time she sat in her car outside her ex-husband's new house, staring at the windows, wondering if she should knock.

Instead, she pours more wine.

Mike watches as she does. "I don't drink much these days," he says, lifting his glass, "but I'll make an exception."

Dana clinks her glass to his. "To exceptions."

The conversation shifts, the words growing softer, more careful. The weight of things unsaid hangs between them like something fragile. They talk about what it's like, starting over at this age. The strange loneliness of it. The nights that stretch too long, the mornings that come too fast.

Dana remembers a night, years ago, sitting in her kitchen after her ex had left for good. The house had felt hollow, his coffee mug still in the sink, his coat hanging by the door as if he'd just stepped out for a moment. She'd sat at the table with a glass of wine, staring at her reflection in the darkened window, wondering what she was supposed to do now.

Mike tells her about his father, a man who was always just out of reach emotionally. "He was there," he says, "but not really. You know?"

# Inheritance

Isla Chang

The rain moves sideways in the wind,  
sweeping the gutters clean of yesterday's paper—  
headlines that no longer matter,  
stories no one finished reading.

In the kitchen, the smell of oranges and dust.  
A knife left on the counter,  
a bowl of peels curling inward  
like something remembering itself.

The old house hums with its usual complaints—  
pipes knocking in the walls, the slow sigh  
of the front door never quite shutting right.  
This house, this body,  
both full of things passed down.

A father's silence, a mother's hands  
folding, unfolding—  
the way we learn to carry what we can  
and leave the rest for ghosts.

Upstairs, the attic is full of boxes  
no one will open.  
Names written in fading ink,  
a past too brittle to unfold.

Outside, the rain keeps falling—  
soft and steady, washing the world  
of everything except what stays.

Dana nods. "I do."

She tells him about her mother, how she used to hum when she cooked, how Dana hadn't noticed when the humming stopped. How grief had a way of sneaking up, of settling into the small spaces of a house until it felt like part of the furniture.

At some point, Dana stands and moves to the old stereo near the bookshelf. She flips through a few CDs before settling on something—soft, familiar. When the music starts, she turns back to him. "I love this one."

Mike listens for a moment, then smiles. "Yeah. Me too."

She hesitates, then holds out a hand. "Come on."

He chuckles. "You want me to dance?"

"Yes."

He stands, taking her hand, and they sway in the small space between the couch and the table. It's slow, comfortable. Dana rests her cheek against his shoulder for just a second before pulling back.

She can feel it building—something unspoken, something just on the edge of meaning more.

When the song ends, they step apart.

Mike looks at her, his expression unreadable. "It's nice to just be here."

Dana nods. She understands.

He stays another hour. They eat the cheesecake. Talk a little more. Laugh, even. The stories they tell start small—work frustrations, childhood memories, the oddities of aging—but they deepen.

Dana tells him about the time she got lost driving home from her son's college. How she'd pulled into a gas station, sat in the car with the map open on her phone, feeling stupid for not knowing where she was. A man in a baseball cap had knocked on her window, asked if she was okay. She'd almost cried, just because someone had asked.

Mike tells her about a trip he took with his daughter when she was ten. How they'd stayed at some run-down motel because it was all he could afford at the time, and how she'd loved it anyway, called it "their little adventure."

"I still think about that," he says. "How sometimes, the worst circumstances make the best memories."

Eventually, he stands and reaches for his jacket. He hesitates before putting it on, as if measuring whether to say something more. Dana watches him, waiting, but he only smiles softly.

"Thanks for dinner," he says at the door. "And for... everything."

Dana nods. "Yeah."

She watches as he walks down the hall, hears the elevator doors slide open and then close.

Inside, the apartment feels quieter than before. She rinses the glasses, turns off the stereo, and stands for a long moment in the dim kitchen light. Then she heads to bed, pulling the covers over herself, realizing that maybe, just maybe, this was enough.

As she lies there, she replays the night. The warmth of his voice, the weight of his hand in hers. She doesn't know if he'll call again. If she'll call him. If any of it will amount to something beyond this evening.

But for now, in the quiet dark, she lets herself believe that what they shared tonight—whatever it was—mattered. □

# Train Your Brain for Happiness

## The Neuroscience of Joy

Lena Whitmore



**H**appiness is often perceived as an elusive and fleeting emotion, something that arrives unexpectedly in brief, shimmering moments before slipping through our fingers. Many people believe happiness is a matter of luck, a spontaneous reaction to fortunate events, or a reward granted by external circumstances. But what if happiness wasn't just a matter of chance? What if joy could be something we actively cultivate, something we shape and strengthen

through deliberate effort, much like we train our muscles at the gym?

Emerging research in neuroscience suggests that happiness is far more than an abstract or mystical feeling—it is, in fact, a complex neurological process governed by chemical reactions and neural pathways that we can influence. Rather than being entirely dependent on external events, happiness is something that can be nurtured, developed, and sustained through intentional habits and mindset shifts. By deepening our understanding of

how the brain processes joy and applying practical, science-backed strategies to enhance positive emotions, we can take greater control of our emotional well-being and create a lasting foundation for happiness in our daily lives.

### The Science Behind Happiness

**H**appiness is deeply rooted in brain chemistry. The brain releases neurotransmitters, which are chemical messengers that regulate emotions, motivation, and pleasure. Among the most

influential neurotransmitters for happiness are dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins. Dopamine, often called the “feel-good” neurotransmitter, is associated with reward and pleasure. It motivates us to pursue goals and reinforces positive behaviors. Serotonin plays a major role in mood stabilization and overall well-being. Low levels of serotonin are linked to depression and anxiety. Oxytocin, often referred to as the “love hormone,” is released during social bonding and enhances feelings of connection and trust. Endorphins, which act as natural painkillers, are released during exercise, laughter, and pleasurable activities, reducing stress and enhancing mood.

By actively engaging in behaviors that stimulate these chemicals, we can train our brains to cultivate happiness more consistently. This is possible because of the concept of neuroplasticity, which is the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. When we repeatedly engage in positive behaviors, our neural pathways strengthen, making happiness a more automatic state of mind

### Rewiring the Brain for Joy

One of the most effective ways to rewire the brain for happiness is through gratitude. Studies show that regularly practicing gratitude increases serotonin and dopamine levels, reinforcing positive neural circuits. People who consistently express gratitude tend to have stronger relationships, a greater sense of well-being, and even better physical health.

One simple way to incorporate gratitude into daily life is by keeping a gratitude journal and writing down things to be thankful for. Expressing appreciation to others, whether through a heartfelt message or a simple thank-you, can also reinforce positive emotions. Reflecting on positive experiences at the end of each day can further deepen the impact of gratitude on overall happiness.

Mindfulness practices, including meditation, have also been shown to physically change the brain. Research using MRI scans reveals that meditation increases gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for higher-order thinking, and decreases activity in

the amygdala, which is the fear center of the brain. This leads to improved emotional regulation and long-term happiness. Engaging in deep breathing exercises helps cultivate mindfulness, allowing individuals to stay present in the moment. Setting aside even just ten minutes a day for meditation can yield significant benefits. Additionally, using mindfulness techniques during everyday activities, such as eating or walking, can help cultivate awareness and appreciation for the present moment.

Physical activity is another powerful tool for boosting happiness. Exercise triggers the release of endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin, all of which contribute to an improved mood and reduced stress. The benefits of exercise go beyond physical health; they extend to

“Developing a habit of looking for silver linings in difficult situations, rather than dwelling on setbacks, gradually re-wires the brain to adopt a more positive perspective.”

mental and emotional well-being as well. Choosing activities that bring joy, whether it’s dancing, jogging, or yoga, can make exercise more enjoyable and sustainable. Spending time outdoors while exercising can also be beneficial since natural sunlight boosts serotonin levels. Engaging in physical activities with friends or loved ones can enhance social bonds, increasing feelings of happiness through the release of oxytocin.

### The Importance of Social Connections

Humans are wired for connection, and strong social relationships are among the biggest predictors of long-term

happiness. Social interactions trigger the release of oxytocin, reinforcing positive emotions and strengthening bonds. Prioritizing face-to-face interactions over digital communication fosters deeper connections. Acts of kindness, whether through small gestures or larger acts of generosity, not only benefit others but also contribute to personal happiness. Fostering deep, meaningful relationships is more important than focusing on the quantity of social connections. Meaningful interactions with close friends and family members provide emotional support, enhancing overall well-being.

The relationship between diet and happiness is another area of growing interest. The gut and brain are closely connected, and diet plays a crucial role in emotional well-being. Certain foods help regulate neurotransmitters and enhance mood stability. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods like salmon, walnuts, and flaxseeds, support brain function and emotional health. Probiotics, present in foods like yogurt, kimchi, and kombucha, help maintain a healthy gut microbiome, which influences serotonin production. Avoiding excessive sugar and processed foods can prevent mood swings and energy crashes, supporting a more stable emotional state.

### The Role of Sleep in Emotional Well-Being

The importance of sleep in maintaining emotional well-being cannot be overstated. Sleep deprivation disrupts the delicate balance of neurotransmitters in the brain and leads to an increase in stress hormones such as cortisol, which can heighten anxiety and make it significantly harder to experience joy. Poor sleep has been linked to mood disorders, irritability, and difficulty regulating emotions, making it an essential component of mental health. Prioritizing quality sleep is not just about getting enough hours of rest; it also involves ensuring that sleep is deep, consistent, and restorative.

Establishing a regular sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day helps regulate the body’s internal clock, making it easier to fall asleep and wake up refreshed. Exposure to blue light from screens before bedtime

# The Last Agreement

Vivian Carter

The sky signs its name in fire now,  
ash drifting soft as moths over the highways,  
over the glass towers reflecting a world  
already disappearing.

The rivers have stopped writing letters to the sea.  
They stall in the fields,  
curl backward into themselves,  
thick with chemicals no one can pronounce.  
Someone once said water remembers—  
but I wonder what it forgets first.

In the city, a boy plants a sapling  
between cracks in the concrete.  
His hands are dirty, his knees scuffed,  
but he smiles like someone  
who still believes in tomorrow.

The men in suits gather in rooms  
where the air is cold enough  
to keep their hands from sweating.  
They shake on promises  
with invisible ink,  
sign papers that curl at the edges  
before the ink even dries.

And outside, the forests lean closer,  
listening.  
The oceans rise without permission.  
A wind blows through the empty fields,  
searching for something green,  
something stubborn,  
something still willing to grow.

suppresses melatonin production, which interferes with the body's natural sleep cycle, so limiting screen time at night is crucial for quality rest. Creating a calming pre-sleep routine, such as engaging in light reading, meditation, or listening to soothing music, helps signal to the body that it's time to wind down. Sleep hygiene, including maintaining a cool, dark, and quiet sleep environment, further supports uninterrupted rest. By prioritizing sleep and recognizing its role in cognitive function, emotional resilience, and overall happiness, individuals can create a foundation for long-term well-being.

## Reframing Negative Thoughts

Cognitive reframing is a powerful psycho-logical strategy that involves consciously changing the way we perceive and respond to challenges. This technique trains the brain to shift focus from problems to potential solutions, ultimately fostering resilience and a more optimistic outlook. Negative thought patterns, if left unchecked, can reinforce neural pathways associated with stress and anxiety. Recognizing these thoughts and actively challenging their validity allows individuals to break the cycle of negativity.

Replacing self-critical or defeatist thoughts with affirmations and constructive self-talk helps reinforce a healthier mindset. Developing a habit of looking for silver linings in difficult situations, rather than dwelling on setbacks, gradually rewires the brain to adopt a more positive perspective. Over time, consistently practicing cognitive reframing strengthens neural pathways linked to optimism, making happiness a more natural and instinctive response to life's challenges.

## Taking Charge of Your Happiness

Happiness is not a passive experience—  
it is an active and intentional process shaped by our thoughts, behaviors, and lifestyle choices. By understanding the neuroscience of joy and implementing practical strategies, we can train our brains to cultivate lasting happiness. Whether through gratitude, mindfulness, exercise, social connections, nutrition, sleep, or cognitive reframing, small daily actions can lead to profound emotional well-being. The power to rewire our brains for joy is within our reach—it just takes commitment, practice, and a belief that happiness is not just a destination, but a way of living. □

# Why I Can't Stop Subscribing to Things I Don't Need

Eric N. Patel

financial and psychological drain. And yet, I can't stop.

## The Allure of Subscriptions

Subscriptions have a certain magic to them. They promise convenience, exclusivity, and the illusion of betterment. For a low monthly fee, you can unlock access to curated content, healthier meals, or a more productive version of yourself. The model is brilliant: small recurring charges are easier to justify than a large one-time expense, even if the total cost over time is significantly higher. It's the same psychological trick that makes "Buy Now, Pay Later" schemes so enticing.

But the true genius of subscriptions lies in their ability to prey on our aspirations. Each service represents the person we want to become. The streaming platform for cinephiles suggests we're sophisticated, cultured individuals who appreciate indie films and obscure documentaries. The fitness app implies we're committed to our health and well-being. The audiobook service whispers that we're intellectuals with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Subscriptions don't just sell products; they sell identities.

## The Paradox of Choice

One of the reasons I struggle to cancel subscriptions is the fear of missing out. What if the meal kit service sends a recipe that would have changed my life? What if the meditation app has the perfect session to help me finally achieve inner peace? What if, one day, I'm in the mood for a specific type of content that only my least-used streaming platform can provide? Subscriptions thrive on this paradox of choice. By offering an endless

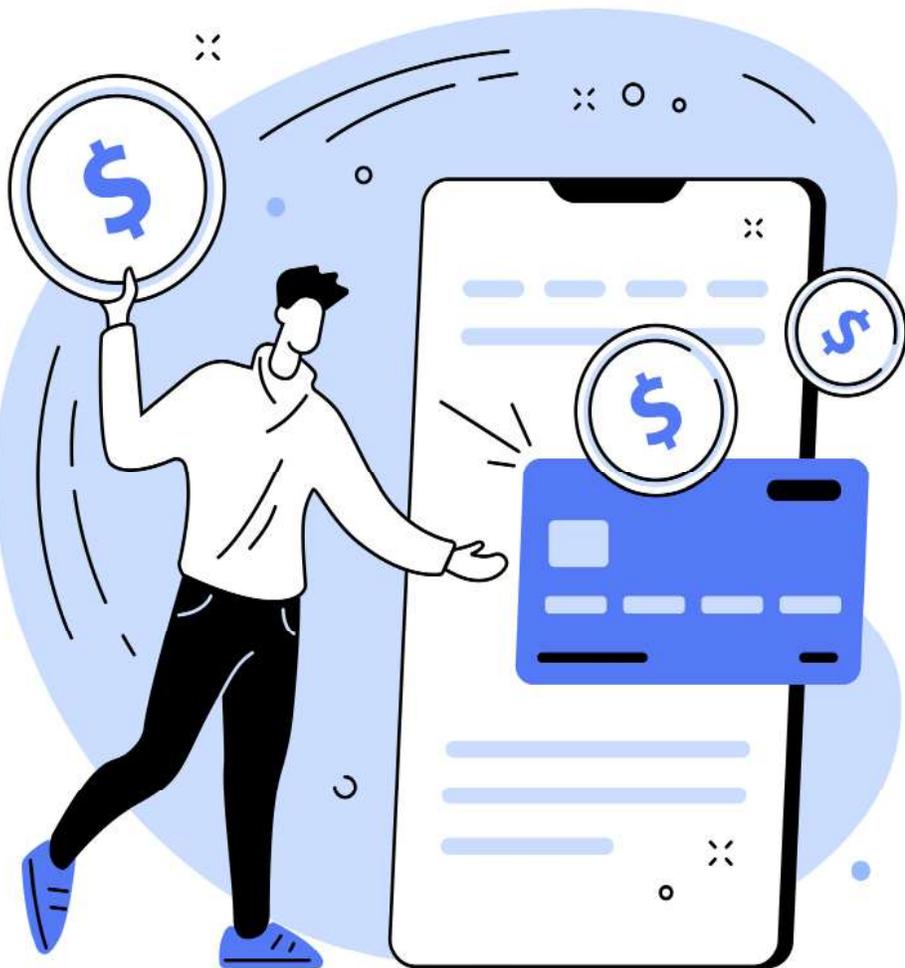


Illustration: Visual Generation / Adobe Stock

It all started with a free trial. A harmless little box on a website that promised, "Cancel anytime, no strings attached." I clicked it without a second thought, thrilled at the prospect of seven days of unlimited access to an obscure documentary streaming service. A week later, I had forgotten to cancel and was \$9.99 poorer, all for the privilege of ignoring my subscription for three months before finally admitting defeat and canceling. It was the beginning

of a pattern—one that has since spiraled out of control.

Today, my inbox is a graveyard of receipts for services I barely remember signing up for. A meal kit subscription that sends me recipes I'll never cook. A premium meditation app that I ironically forgot to use during a particularly stressful month. A digital magazine archive that I've opened exactly twice. Each subscription feels reasonable in isolation, but together they've become a

array of options, they create the illusion of necessity.

And yet, the sheer abundance of choices often leads to paralysis. Faced with countless options, I find myself overwhelmed and unable to make a decision. Instead of cooking a meal from the kit or meditating with the app, I end up scrolling aimlessly through their offerings, paralyzed by the pressure to make the “right” choice. Subscriptions promise convenience, but they often deliver the opposite.

### The Hidden Costs

Subscriptions aren’t just a financial burden; they’re a psychological one. Each unused service is a reminder of my failure to follow through on my intentions. The yoga app I haven’t opened in months mocks me every time I see its icon on my phone. The language-learning platform I subscribed to in a fit of optimism now feels like a monument to my lack of discipline. These services were supposed to make my life better, but instead, they’ve become sources of guilt and shame.

There’s also the issue of cognitive clutter. Each subscription comes with its own set of emails, notifications, and app updates. Managing these digital obligations takes up mental space that could be better spent elsewhere. Even the act of canceling a subscription is a hassle, often involving a maze of menus and passive-aggressive prompts designed to make you reconsider. The entire system is engineered to keep you hooked, whether you’re actively using the service or not.

### The Rise of the Subscription Economy

It’s not just me. The subscription model has taken over nearly every industry, from entertainment and fitness to groceries and software. What started with magazines and newspapers has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar economy where everything from toothbrushes to luxury cars can be rented on a monthly basis. Companies love subscriptions because they provide a steady stream of revenue and valuable data on consumer habits. Customers, in turn, are lured by the promise of flexibility and convenience.

But the rise of the subscription economy has also blurred the line between necessity and indulgence. Services that were once

considered luxuries are now marketed as essentials. Do I really need three different streaming platforms? Probably not. But each one feels indispensable in its own way. This gradual creep of subscriptions into every aspect of our lives makes it harder to draw the line and say, “Enough.”

### The Emotional Attachment

Part of the difficulty in canceling subscriptions is the emotional attachment we form to them. Even if I’m not actively using a service, the idea of it provides comfort. The audiobook platform is like a security blanket, reassuring me that I could be well-read if I just tried a little harder. The meal kit subscription is a symbol of the domestic goddess I aspire to be. Canceling these services feels like admitting defeat, like giving up on the person I want to become.

“Subscriptions are seductive. They promise convenience, transformation, and the allure of a better life.”

There’s also the sunk cost fallacy to contend with. Every month, I tell myself that I’ll start using the subscription more to get my money’s worth. This logic keeps me trapped in a cycle of spending and guilt. Even when I know, rationally, that I’m unlikely to change my habits, it’s hard to let go.

### Breaking the Cycle

So, how do I break free from my subscription addiction? The first step is awareness. I’ve started tracking my subscriptions in a spreadsheet, listing the cost, frequency of use, and whether or not they genuinely add value to my life. This simple exercise has been eye-opening. Seeing the total monthly expense laid out in black and white is a powerful motivator to start cutting back.

Next, I’ve begun setting stricter boundaries for myself. Before subscribing to a new service, I ask: Is this something I

truly need, or is it just a shiny distraction? Will it genuinely improve my life, or is it another aspirational purchase that I’ll regret in a month? These questions help me pause and reflect before committing.

Finally, I’ve embraced the concept of “digital minimalism.” This means prioritizing quality over quantity and focusing on a few key services that bring me joy and fulfillment. Instead of subscribing to every streaming platform, I rotate between them, canceling one before signing up for another. It’s not a perfect system, but it’s a start.

### The Bigger Picture

My subscription habit is symptomatic of a larger issue: the relentless push toward convenience and instant gratification in modern society. We live in an age where everything is available at the click of a button, from groceries to entertainment to human connection. Subscriptions are just one piece of this puzzle, but they’re emblematic of a culture that prioritizes ease over effort and quantity over quality.

Breaking free from this mindset requires more than just canceling a few subscriptions. It requires a fundamental shift in how we approach consumption and value. Instead of chasing after the next big thing, we need to focus on what truly matters and learn to be content with less. This is easier said than done, of course, but it’s a goal worth striving for.

### The Bottom Line

Subscriptions are seductive. They promise convenience, transformation, and the allure of a better life. But for many of us, they’ve become traps, draining our wallets and cluttering our minds. Breaking free requires self-awareness, discipline, and a willingness to let go of the identities we’ve constructed around these services.

I’m still a work in progress. My spreadsheet of subscriptions is a constant reminder of how far I have to go. But each time I cancel a service, I feel a little lighter, a little freer. It’s a small step toward reclaiming control in a world that’s designed to keep us hooked.

So, the next time a free trial pops up on my screen, I’ll think twice before clicking. Because while subscriptions may promise the world, the real challenge lies in learning to live without them. □

# The Quiet Weight of a Sunday Morning

Evelyn M. Smith



Photo: Kenneth Sponsler / Adobe Stock

**I**t was a small town, the kind that clung to the edge of itself as though it might unravel if it expanded too far. Nothing new ever seemed to happen here, or at least not the sort of new that anyone really talked about. The houses were weather-beaten and stoic, their shingles curling at the edges like brittle pages in an old book. The streets, mapped out in

a grid, held a pattern so predictable it was almost oppressive. People lived here their entire lives and still struggled to articulate what kept them bound to its quiet monotony. Maybe the comfort of knowing the script, or the fear of rewriting it.

On this particular Sunday morning, the town was draped in the kind of stillness that felt thick and syrupy, clinging to your

skin. Church bells rang out in measured tones, their chime filling the air like an accusation. Not everyone went to church, but everyone heard the bells, felt their weight. They lingered in the ears of those who stayed home, a reminder that even absence could be accounted for.

Marilyn sat on the edge of her unmade bed, her bare feet brushing the braided rug

her mother had given her years ago. She was thirty-eight, though she felt older—as if her body and the years had conspired to skip a decade or two. Her face in the mirror across the room looked puffy, its angles softened by a lack of sleep and an excess of unresolved arguments. She thought about making coffee, then dismissed the idea. The coffee maker was temperamental, sputtering and hissing as though annoyed by the effort of being useful. It mirrored how she often felt—obligated to function but resentful of the demand.

Downstairs, the house groaned with the subtle movements of life. The sound of the TV—a game show, judging by the bursts of canned laughter—filtered through the floorboards. Her husband, Gary, had planted himself on the couch hours ago, his body molded into the cushions as if to become one with them. He would sit there until lunch, maybe even longer if she didn't say something. She wouldn't, though. Speaking would invite a response, and the weight of conversation was more than she wanted to carry.

Marilyn's gaze drifted to the window, where the curtains swayed slightly from the draft that always snuck in around the frame. Outside, the street was empty except for Mrs. Keating, who was kneeling in her garden. Even from a distance, Marilyn could see the woman's determination, the way her gloved hands plunged into the soil as though she were digging for something lost. Mrs. Keating was in her seventies, her body small but wiry, like an old tree that refused to be toppled. Marilyn often found herself watching her, not out of admiration exactly, but something adjacent to it. She envied the way the older woman seemed to move with purpose, as though even the most mundane tasks carried some hidden significance.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand, cutting through the quiet. Marilyn glanced at it, her stomach tightening when she saw the name: Sarah. Her sister. They hadn't spoken in months, not since the argument at Thanksgiving that had ended with Sarah

storming out and Marilyn slamming the door behind her. She let the phone buzz again, then stop. A minute later, it buzzed once more. This time, Marilyn picked it up.

"Hello?" Her voice came out scratchy, as though the silence of the morning had left a residue in her throat.

"Marilyn, hey. I—I wasn't sure you'd answer." Sarah's voice was tentative, like someone edging out onto thin ice.

"I almost didn't." The words slipped out before Marilyn could stop them. She closed her eyes, already regretting the sharpness in her tone.

There was a pause on the other end, the kind that stretched long enough to make you wonder if the call had been disconnected. "I know I shouldn't have just called out of the blue like this," Sarah said finally. "But... I was thinking about you. About us. And I wanted to..."

"Apologize?" Marilyn offered, though it came out more like a challenge than an olive branch.

"Yeah," Sarah said, her voice quieter now. "I want to apologize."

Marilyn didn't respond right away. She looked back at the window, at Mrs. Keating, who was now sitting on her heels, brushing dirt from her gloves. The older woman seemed so far removed from the world of phone calls and grudges, her focus rooted in the earth beneath her.

"It's fine," Marilyn said finally, though she wasn't sure she meant it. "We don't have to... go into all that."

"I think we do," Sarah said. Her voice had gained a slight edge, as though she'd decided to stop tiptoeing around. "We can't just keep doing this. Ignoring things. Pretending they're fine when they're not."

Marilyn felt a prickle of irritation. "I'm not pretending anything."

"Aren't you?"

The words hung between them, heavy and undeniable. Marilyn wanted to argue, to say something cutting that would put Sarah back in her place. But she didn't. Instead, she said, "I'll call you back later. Okay?"

There was a pause, then Sarah's resigned, "Okay."

Marilyn ended the call and set the phone back on the nightstand. She felt unmoored, as though the conversation had shifted something in her, something she couldn't quite name. She stood and made her way downstairs, her footsteps slow and deliberate, as though descending into another version of herself.

Gary was still on the couch, the remote balanced on his stomach, his eyes glazed over as he stared at the screen. He didn't look up when she entered the room, didn't acknowledge her at all. Marilyn watched him for a moment, her thoughts flickering like static. Then she walked into the kitchen, opened the cupboard, and pulled out the coffee maker. It hissed and sputtered as she filled it with water and grounds, but she didn't mind. The sound was familiar, almost comforting.

As the coffee brewed, Marilyn leaned against the counter, her hands gripping the edge as though she might slip if she let go. She thought about Sarah, about the way her voice had wavered, the way it had steadied. She thought about Mrs. Keating, still kneeling in her garden, her hands dirty but purposeful. And she thought about herself, standing here in this kitchen, waiting for the coffee to brew, as though the day might start differently if she held onto this moment long enough.

The coffee maker beeped, and Marilyn poured herself a cup, the steam rising like a ghost. She took a sip, the bitterness grounding her, and walked back to the living room. Gary glanced at her briefly, his eyes flickering with something—acknowledgment, maybe, or just surprise. She sat down in the armchair across from him, the coffee warm in her hands, and turned her gaze to the window. Mrs. Keating was still there, her movements steady and deliberate, as though she had all the time in the world.

"Sarah called," Marilyn said after a moment. Her voice was quiet, almost tentative, but it cut through the room like the chime of a bell.

# Online Enthrallment

Heimir Steinarsson

Gary looked at her, his expression unreadable. “Yeah? What did she want?” Marilyn took another sip of coffee, the bitterness settling in her chest. “I’m not sure,” she said. “But I think she’s tired of pretending.”

Gary didn’t respond right away. Instead, he muted the TV and turned toward her. “Are you?”

The question caught her off guard, its simplicity disarming. Marilyn set her coffee cup down on the side table, her fingers brushing against the rim as if reluctant to let go.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe.”

Gary leaned back, his hands clasped over his stomach. “You should talk to her. Actually talk. You’ve been holding onto that fight for too long.”

Marilyn’s lips pressed into a thin line. “It wasn’t just a fight. It was everything leading up to it, everything we didn’t say. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe not,” he admitted. “But it’s eating at you. And at her too, probably.”

Marilyn stared at him, surprised by the clarity in his words. It wasn’t like Gary to press her about things, to push her into uncomfortable territory. She felt a twinge of resentment but also something softer, something closer to gratitude.

“I’ll think about it,” she said finally, though she wasn’t sure if she meant it.

Gary nodded and unmuted the TV, the game show’s artificial cheer filling the room again. Marilyn picked up her coffee and turned her gaze back to the window. Mrs. Keating was still there, now pruning a bush with a pair of sharp shears. Her movements were precise, almost meditative, as though each snip was a small act of defiance against the chaos of the world.

Marilyn watched her for a long time, the coffee growing cold in her hands. Somewhere deep inside, she felt the faintest stirring of something she hadn’t felt in years: the possibility of change. □

We have to have a serious chat  
about the bloody Internet  
and talk about the sneaky way  
it rules our lives from day to day.

No sooner than we are awake  
we turn our cell phones on to make  
sure that we haven’t missed a thing  
while we were calmly slumbering.

With aching, half-shut eyes we stare  
impatient at the blazing glare,  
frying our optic nerves, but keen  
to see what crops up on the screen.

And it gets only worse from here.  
The phone is with us everywhere  
we go and we are constantly  
subdued to its authority.

I would suggest we take a break  
from all those implements that make  
us live in such a horrid way:  
Let’s keep our phone shut off today.



Scan to visit the website directly!



# ONE STEP TRANSCREATION

When working with us, you take a creative approach to translation.

We recreate your advertising messages, brochures, printed and online catalogs, websites, videos, magazines, and other copy designed to promote and sell your products and services in your target markets around the world.

Send us your content and we'll deliver it translated and with the same look and layout as the original document - ready to print or publish online.

Markmál ehf. Translation agency | Reykjavik/Iceland

www.markmal.is markmal@markmal.is