

*The*  
MANTELPIECE

Issue 19

Literary Magazine

March 2025





*A jewellery brand with  
a surprising history*



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www.themantelpiece.org

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# Freedom of Speech in the Time of Big Tech Autocracy

In an age where algorithms dictate discourse and billionaires shape policy, the concept of freedom of speech stands at a precarious crossroads. The recent alignment of major technology magnates with political power, exemplified by Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos openly supporting President Donald Trump's second administration, has fueled anxieties about the health of democracy and the future of free expression. The convergence of vast economic power with political influence has raised urgent questions: Is freedom of speech under threat in the shadow of Big Tech autocracy? And should we, as a society, be worried?

Freedom of speech has long been celebrated as a cornerstone of democratic values, enshrined in constitutional protections across the globe. Yet, the digital revolution has introduced new complexities. Platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Amazon Web Services act as gatekeepers of modern communication, wielding immense control over what can be said, seen, and shared. In theory, these platforms are neutral conduits for expression; in practice, they are governed by opaque policies, proprietary algorithms, and the financial interests of their corporate owners. When such tech behemoths align with government power, the implications are profound.

The alliance between President Trump and Big Tech figures is unprecedented, not only in its overt nature but also in its implications for public discourse. Elon Musk, for instance, has become a central figure in this new political-technological axis, leading the Department of Government Efficiency and pledging to streamline bureaucracy. While efficiency may be a noble goal, critics argue that Musk's approach—rooted in his private-sector ethos—could prioritize cost-cutting and corporate convenience over public accountability and equity. Already, his tenure as CEO of X has demonstrated a penchant for privileging certain voices while suppressing others, whether through the reinstatement of controversial accounts or the abrupt suspension of journalists.

Similarly, Mark Zuckerberg's role in this new paradigm cannot be overlooked. Facebook's history of influencing elections, from the Cambridge Analytica scandal to the proliferation of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the plat-

form's capacity to shape public opinion on an unprecedented scale. With Zuckerberg now openly backing the administration, concerns about the platform's impartiality and its potential as a tool for state propaganda are not unfounded. Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos, whose Amazon empire includes a significant stake in cloud computing and media, represents another axis of power capable of tilting the scales of speech and access.

At first glance, the collaboration between government and Big Tech might seem like a pragmatic solution to the challenges of the modern era. After all, these companies have the resources, expertise, and infrastructure to

“So, should we be worried? The answer is a resounding yes. The stakes are too high to ignore.”

tackle complex problems like misinformation, cybersecurity, and the digital divide. However, the concentration of power in the hands of a few raises the specter of autocracy. History teaches us that unchecked authority—even under the guise of progress—inevitably erodes individual freedoms. In this context, freedom of speech is particularly vulnerable.

Consider the mechanisms by which speech is controlled in the digital age. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement often amplify sensationalism and polarizing content, drowning out nuanced or dissenting voices. Content moderation policies, while necessary to curb hate speech and misinformation, are often inconsistently applied and subject to the whims of corporate leadership. When these mechanisms are influenced by political considerations, the line between censorship and governance becomes dangerously blurred.

Moreover, the economic dependencies created by Big Tech further complicate the picture. Small businesses, independent creators, and even mainstream media outlets rely on platforms like Facebook, Amazon, and X for visibility and revenue. This dependency gives tech companies enormous leverage to shape

the narratives that reach the public. For instance, changes to Facebook's algorithm have, in the past, decimated traffic to news outlets that fail to align with the platform's priorities. Such actions highlight the precarious nature of speech in a system where access is mediated by corporate interests.

The chilling effect of Big Tech autocracy extends beyond overt censorship. When individuals fear that their posts, tweets, or publications might lead to deplatforming or professional repercussions, self-censorship becomes a pervasive phenomenon. This silent erosion of free expression—where individuals preemptively mute themselves to avoid controversy—is perhaps the most insidious threat of all. It stifles not only dissent but also creativity, innovation, and the robust exchange of ideas essential to a thriving democracy.

So, should we be worried? The answer is a resounding yes. The stakes are too high to ignore. However, worry alone is insufficient. What is needed is a concerted effort to address these challenges through regulation, advocacy, and public engagement.

First, governments must implement robust regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability in how Big Tech companies operate. This includes mandating algorithmic transparency, enforcing anti-monopoly laws, and protecting whistleblowers who expose abuses of power. Second, civil society must play an active role in holding both corporations and governments accountable. Advocacy groups, journalists, and academics have a crucial part to play in scrutinizing policies and practices that threaten free expression. Finally, individuals must reclaim their agency by diversifying their sources of information, supporting independent media, and advocating for digital literacy.

The intersection of Big Tech and political power is not inherently dystopian. With the right safeguards in place, it could foster innovation, efficiency, and inclusivity. However, without vigilance and resistance to overreach, it risks becoming a digital autocracy where freedom of speech is a relic of the past. The choice, as always, rests with us—the citizens, creators, and custodians of democracy. If we are to preserve the right to speak freely, we must act boldly and collectively to ensure that power serves the many, not the few.. □ L.H.

# Back to the Basics

## Why We Must Return to Roman Literature in the Age of AI

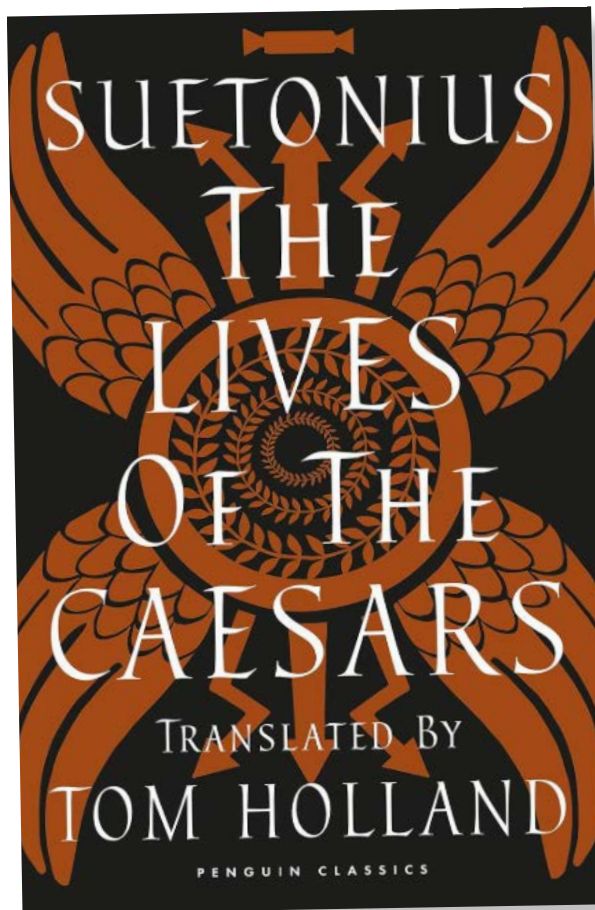
Eleanor Jiménez

In a literary landscape increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, where algorithms churn out formulaic narratives and synthetic prose, there is an urgent need to look back—to the classics, to the foundational texts that defined Western literature. And among these, Roman literature stands out as a model of depth, wit, and timeless relevance.

The recent surge of interest in Suetonius, particularly fueled by Tom Holland's bestselling translation of *The Lives of the Caesars*, highlights the continued relevance of this ancient Roman historian in modern discourse. Suetonius, who lived during the reign of the Flavian emperors in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, is best known for his vivid, often salacious accounts of the lives of Rome's emperors, offering unparalleled insight into the political and personal intrigues of imperial Rome. His work, which blends biography with anecdotal storytelling, remains a cornerstone of classical historiography, revered for its meticulous detail and candid, sometimes scandalous revelations about the men who ruled the Roman Empire.

Suetonius's significance stretches far beyond the confines of ancient Rome; his work has had an enduring influence on Western civilization, particularly in shaping our understanding of power, leadership, and human nature. As one of the earliest writers to offer a comprehensive portrait of the lives and reigns of the emperors, his *Lives of the Caesars* has informed generations of historians, scholars, and political thinkers. His candid exploration of the emperors' moral failings,

sexual exploits, and political machinations provides an invaluable window into the darker aspects of governance, making his work as relevant today as it was in antiquity. The patterns of ambition, corruption, and scandal that Suetonius details transcend the confines of his time, offering a timeless



reflection on the human condition and the complexities of power.

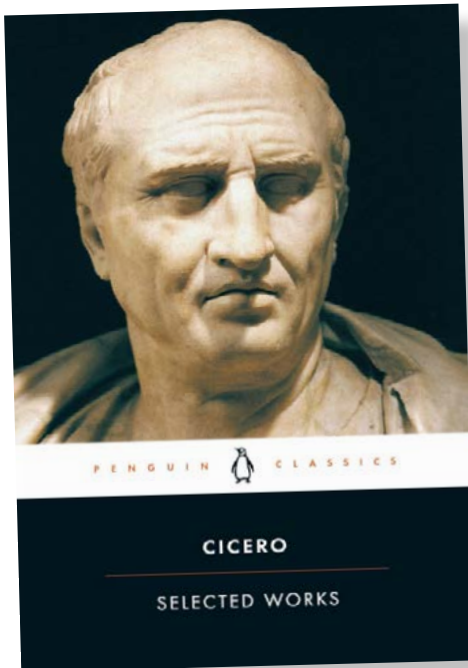
In our current era, where political intrigue and scandal often dominate headlines, Suetonius's portraits of emperors—ranging

from the competent to the utterly depraved—resonate with remarkable clarity. His work serves as a mirror to our own age, reminding us of the perpetual nature of power struggles and the consequences of unchecked ambition. Suetonius's unflinching portrayal of the emperors' vices and virtues provides a sharp, often uncomfortable lens through which we can examine contemporary political figures, whose flaws and follies often mirror those of their ancient counterparts. The renewed popularity of Suetonius's work, especially in the context of a world where media, technology, and political transparency blur the lines between fact and spectacle, underscores the enduring relevance of his insights.

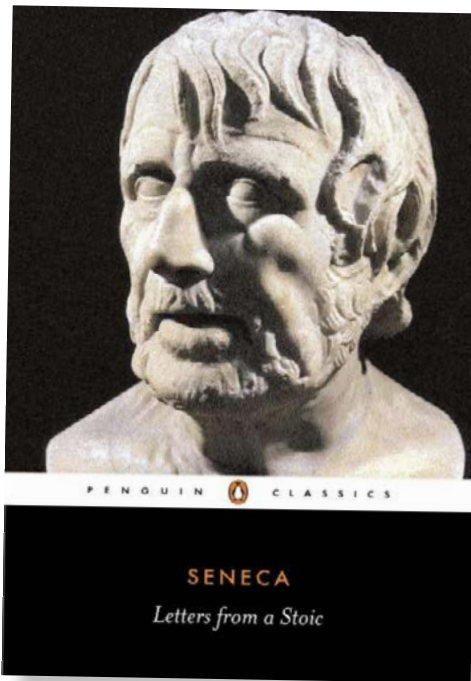
Moreover, Suetonius is not an isolated figure in Roman literature, but part of a broader tradition of Roman writers whose works speak to the complexity of human history and governance. In the age of artificial intelligence, when the very nature of creativity and authorship is being redefined, there is a renewed urgency to turn to the works of authors like Suetonius. These texts not only provide historical context but also foster critical thinking and reflection on the ethics of power and leadership. As AI increasingly shapes the landscape of literature and culture, Suetonius's work reminds us of the irreplaceable

value of human observation and storytelling in capturing the complexities of politics and human nature, ensuring that his voices from the past continue to resonate with clarity in our present moment.

Take Cicero, for instance. Marcus Tullius Cicero was not only one of Rome's greatest orators but also a statesman, philosopher, and political theorist whose works laid the foundation for much of Western thought on law, ethics, and governance. Born in 106 BCE, Cicero rose through the ranks of Roman politics, eventually becoming consul in 63 BCE. He played a crucial role in the late Republic, attempting to preserve its institutions amidst growing threats from ambitious generals and political upheavals. His speeches, such as the *Catilinarian Orations*, were masterpieces of rhetoric, exposing conspiracies and swaying public opinion with their forceful argumentation and eloquence. Beyond politics, Cicero's philosophical treatises—*De Officiis* (On Duties), *De Re Publica* (On the Republic), and *De Legibus* (On the Laws)—explored justice, duty, and the ideal government, drawing on Greek philosophy while tailoring it to Roman society. His influence is so profound that Renaissance thinkers, the framers of modern democratic constitutions, and legal scholars continue to study his works today.



To read Cicero now is to engage with an intellectual rigor and persuasive force that no machine-generated text can replicate. His moral and political dilemmas—his warnings against tyranny, his defense of civic virtue, and his tragic fate at the hands of autocrats—remain astonishingly relevant, speaking to the enduring struggle between democracy and autocracy in our own times.



Seneca, too, offers a vital counterpoint to the fast-paced, information-saturated present. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a philosopher, playwright, and advisor to Emperor Nero, was one of the foremost proponents of Stoicism in the Roman world. His philosophical writings, such as *Letters to Lucilius*, *De Vita Beata* (On the Happy Life), and *De Brevitate Vitae* (On the Shortness of Life), urge readers to cultivate inner peace, self-discipline, and resilience in the face of external chaos. Seneca's reflections on mortality, fate, and virtue remain strikingly relevant, particularly in an age where technological distractions and the rapid pace of modern life make it easy to lose sight of deeper existential concerns. His life, marked by political ambition, exile, and an eventual forced suicide under Nero's orders, underscores the tension between philosophical ideals and the brutal realities of power.

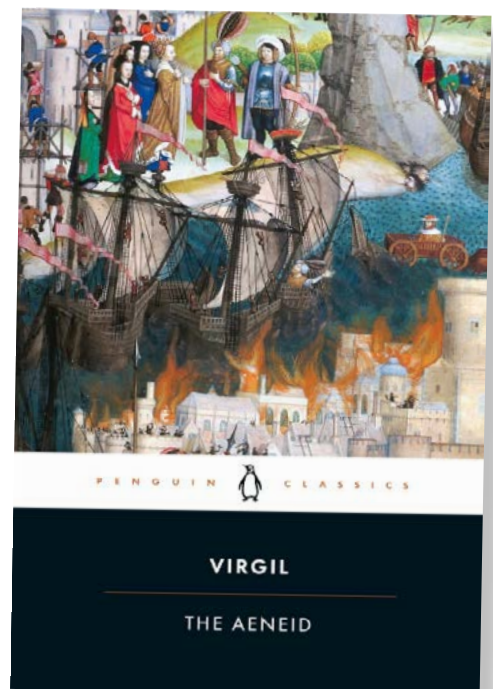
And then there are the poets.

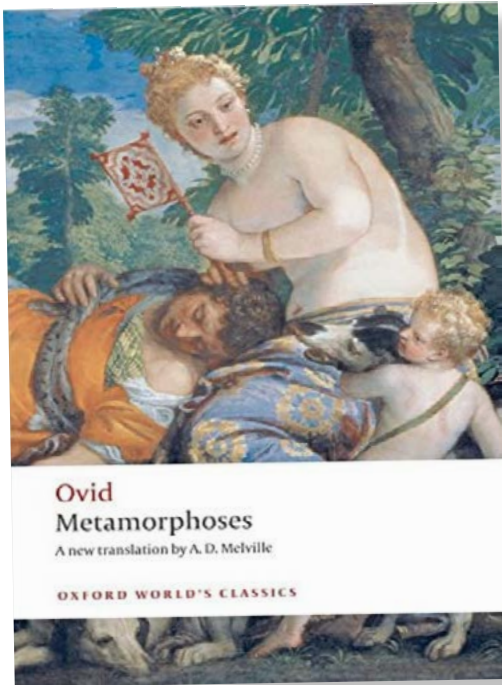
Virgil, widely regarded as Rome's greatest epic poet, occupies a singular place in the literary canon. His magnum opus, *The Aeneid*, is not merely a national epic meant to glorify Rome's origins; it is a deeply philosophical and emotional exploration of fate, duty, and human suffering. Commissioned by Emperor Augustus as part of his broader cultural program to establish Rome's divine destiny, *The Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas, a Trojan warrior who survives the sack of Troy and embarks on a perilous journey to found a new homeland in Italy. Along the way, Aeneas endures

exile, heartbreak, and moral dilemmas that test his devotion to the gods' will.

The poem serves as both a celebration and a critique of imperial Rome, presenting a world where duty to the state often demands personal sacrifice. Virgil's poetic craftsmanship is unparalleled—his use of meter, metaphor, and symbolism creates a work of staggering beauty and complexity, filled with moments of tenderness, grandeur, and haunting sorrow. *The Aeneid* has shaped the works of countless writers, from Dante, who made Virgil his guide through the underworld in *The Divine Comedy*, to Milton, who drew inspiration from Virgil's verse structure and themes in *Paradise Lost*.

Beyond *The Aeneid*, Virgil's earlier works, *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, showcase a different but equally masterful side of his artistry. *Eclogues* (also known as *Bucolics*) are a collection of pastoral poems that blend idyllic scenes of rural life with political allegory and personal longing. These poems, influenced by the Greek poet Theocritus, capture a world of shepherds, lovers, and exiles, often tinged with melancholy. *Georgics*, on the other hand, is a didactic poem on agriculture, but beneath its surface lies a meditation on human labor, the cycles of nature, and the fragile balance between civilization and the wild. These works highlight Virgil's ability to merge the personal with the political, the mythic with the everyday, crafting poetry that speaks to both the grandeur and hardship of human existence.

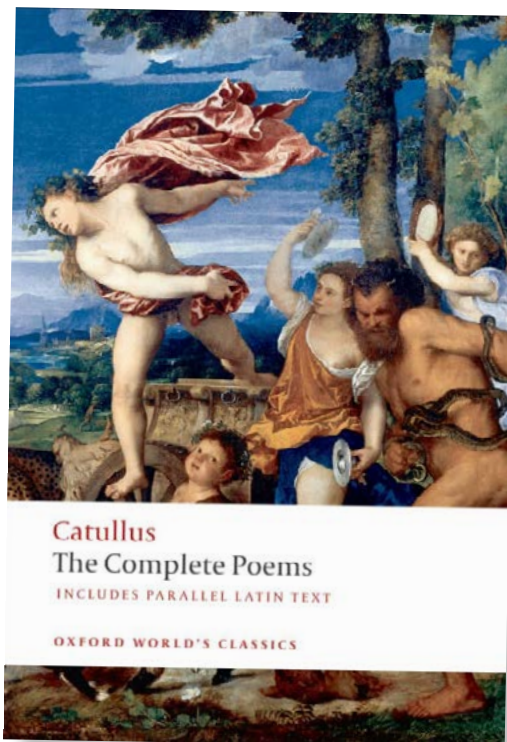




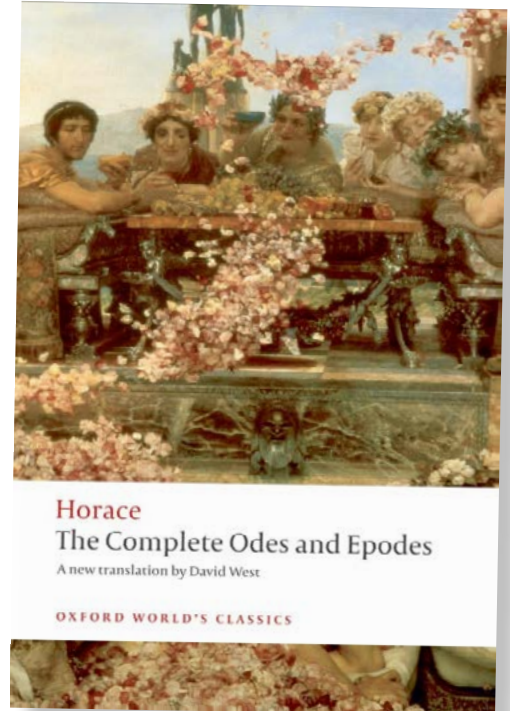
Ovid, in contrast, was a poet of transformation—both literal and figurative. His *Metamorphoses*, a sweeping mythological epic, masterfully weaves together hundreds of myths, exploring themes of identity, change, power, and passion. Written in dazzling, playful, and deeply moving verse, it captures the fluidity of human experience, illustrating how love, ambition, and divine intervention shape destinies. The stories in *Metamorphoses*—from Daphne’s flight from Apollo to the tragic love of Orpheus and Eurydice—continue to inspire artists, poets, and playwrights. But Ovid was not only a storyteller of myths; he was also a sharp-witted chronicler of love and desire. His *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* provide a humorous yet incisive guide to romance, seduction, and the complexities of human relationships, subverting traditional expectations of love poetry with his characteristic irony and wit. Yet Ovid’s literary brilliance did not spare him from misfortune. His exile to the remote town of Tomis on the Black Sea, ordered by Augustus for reasons still shrouded in mystery, cast a shadow over his later years. From exile, he penned his *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, poems of longing and regret that offer a poignant counterpoint to his earlier exuberance. This dramatic arc—from celebrated poet to outcast—only deepens his legend, making him one of the most enigmatic and compelling figures in Roman literature.

Horace, Rome’s great satirist and lyric poet, was a master of blending wit, philosophical depth, and poetic elegance. His *Odes*, drawing inspiration from Greek lyric poetry yet imbued with a distinctly Roman sensibility, explore themes of love, friendship, patriotism, mortality, and the fleeting nature of human joys. These poems are at once deeply personal and universally resonant, expressing a philosophy that values moderation, gratitude, and the appreciation of life’s simple pleasures. His *Satires* and *Epistles*, meanwhile, offer an insightful and often humorous critique of Roman society, covering topics ranging from ambition and greed to personal integrity and the pursuit of happiness. Horace had a keen eye for human folly, and his wry, self-deprecating observations continue to feel strikingly modern. His famous phrase *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) encapsulates his belief in making the most of the present, free from the anxieties of an unpredictable future. In an age dominated by technological distractions and relentless ambition, Horace’s call for balance, wisdom, and contentment remains as relevant as ever.

Finally, there is Catullus, whose poetry is raw, passionate, and deeply personal. Writing in the late Republic, Gaius Valerius Catullus composed verses that range from tender love poems to scathing invective, displaying an emotional intensity that was unparalleled in Roman poetry. His love for Lesbia (believed to be Clodia Metelli) inspired some of the most intimate and



powerful poems ever written, capturing the full spectrum of desire, from ecstatic devotion to jealousy and bitter heartbreak. Unlike the lofty epics of Virgil or the refined satire of Horace, Catullus’s poetry is strikingly direct, offering an unfiltered glimpse into the emotional turmoil of a poet



deeply in love and equally prone to rage and sorrow. His shorter lyric poems, written in a conversational, almost modern tone, address friendship, political corruption, and personal betrayal, often with biting wit. His ability to blend the deeply personal with the universal makes his work timeless, speaking across centuries to anyone who has ever loved, lost, or burned with indignation. Catullus’s influence can be seen in later poets who dared to embrace raw emotion and personal confession, from the Romantic poets to contemporary lyricists.

In an age where artificial intelligence threatens to reduce literature to mere patterns and predictions, the works of these Roman authors remind us of the irreplaceable power of human expression. Their writings, filled with passion, intellect, and profound insight into the human condition, cannot be replicated by any machine. By turning to the classics, we not only preserve our literary heritage but also reaffirm the enduring value of authentic, deeply felt storytelling. The future of literature depends not on artificial replication, but on the continued appreciation of the great works that have shaped our civilization. □

# The Myth of the Self-Made Man

## Why Success Is Never Truly a Solo Achievement

Sofia Almeida



**T**he phrase “self-made” conjures an image of a lone genius, someone who, through sheer determination and talent, carves a path to success against all odds. From rags-to-riches entrepreneurs to visionary artists, the mythology of the self-made individual permeates modern culture. We celebrate these figures in biographies, business books, and motivational speeches, treating their journeys as proof that success is available to anyone willing to work hard enough. But beneath this narrative lies a troubling illusion—one that ignores the profound influence of social structures, luck, privilege, and the countless unseen hands that shape every successful life.

### The Allure of the Self-Made Myth

**A**t its core, the myth of the self-made person appeals to an idea deeply ingrained in Western thought: individualism. In societies that prize personal agency and meritocracy, the belief that anyone can rise through effort alone is not just inspiring—it’s foundational. The American Dream, for example, is built on this very premise: that regardless of background, anyone who works hard enough can achieve success. Stories of self-made figures reinforce this idea, offering real-life examples that seem to validate the meritocratic ideal.

Figures like Elon Musk, Oprah Winfrey, and Steve Jobs are often cited as paragons of self-made success. Musk’s journey from South Africa to Silicon Valley, Winfrey’s

rise from poverty to media mogul, and Jobs’ garage-to-tech-giant story serve as compelling narratives of perseverance and ambition. These stories are powerful because they suggest that external factors—wealth, connections, societal structures—are secondary to personal willpower and ingenuity. They give hope, particularly to those born into less privileged circumstances, that they too can overcome obstacles through sheer effort.

Yet, these same narratives obscure the many advantages that contribute to success. Musk’s early access to wealth, Winfrey’s crucial mentors, and Jobs’ middle-class upbringing and access to early computing resources all played roles in their rise. Recognizing these factors



does not diminish their achievements, but it complicates the simplistic notion of the self-made individual.

### **The Hidden Network of Support**

Every “self-made” success story is, upon closer examination, a collective effort. Education, mentorship, financial support, social connections, and even government infrastructure all play critical roles in individual success. No one operates in a vacuum.

Consider education. A person born into a family that values and can afford higher education is far more likely to succeed than someone who lacks access to quality schooling. The idea that a self-made person rises without any support ignores the fundamental role that public and private institutions play in shaping opportunities. Even those who drop out of school and later succeed—such as Jobs, Bill Gates, or Mark Zuckerberg—first had access to elite institutions like Reed College, Harvard, and private tutoring, which provided them with knowledge, connections, and early opportunities.

Mentorship is another often-overlooked factor. In nearly every industry, success is facilitated by mentors, sponsors, or guides who offer wisdom, open doors, and provide opportunities. Oprah Winfrey, for example, has spoken about the critical role of mentors in her journey. Behind every prominent entrepreneur, artist, or scientist, there are often numerous supporters—teachers, investors, editors, or advisors—who help shape their path.

Even wealth itself, while not a sole determinant of success, provides crucial advantages. Many so-called self-made billionaires had financial cushions that allowed them to take risks without dire consequences. Jeff Bezos, for instance, started Amazon with a \$300,000 loan from his parents. While that doesn’t negate his business acumen, it does challenge the notion that he built his empire entirely from scratch.

### **Luck and the Role of Circumstance**

Beyond financial and social advantages, there is also the often-underestimated role of luck. The right idea at the right time, being born into a stable country, having access to a particular network—these are all forms of luck that influence success.

Consider timing: Many of today’s tech moguls, including Gates and Jobs, were

born in the mid-1950s, placing them in the perfect position to capitalize on the personal computing revolution of the 1970s and 80s. Had they been born a decade earlier or later, their trajectories might have been vastly different.

Luck also plays a role in personal circumstances. A single illness, accident, or family crisis can derail even the most talented individual. Conversely, chance encounters, unforeseen opportunities, or even a lucky break can set someone on a path to success. Recognizing the role of luck does not diminish effort; it simply acknowledges that success is never purely a result of individual will.

### **The Dark Side of the Myth**

The belief in self-made success is not just misleading—it can be harmful. It fuels a culture that dismisses systemic inequality, blaming individuals for their failures while crediting only personal effort for success. If success is entirely self-made, then failure, by this logic, must be entirely self-inflicted. This perspective leads to policies and attitudes that ignore the real barriers people face, from racial and gender discrimination to economic disparity and inadequate social support systems.

For example, discussions about poverty often revolve around personal responsibility rather than structural factors. The self-made myth suggests that anyone struggling financially simply hasn’t worked hard enough or made the right choices, ignoring the realities of generational wealth, access to capital, and systemic discrimination. It allows policymakers to justify cutting social safety nets under the assumption that people should simply “lift themselves up by their bootstraps.”

Additionally, this myth can create unrealistic expectations. It encourages people to believe that success is entirely within their control, leading to frustration, burnout, and disillusionment when hard work alone does not yield the promised rewards. The pressure to be “self-made” can also discourage seeking help, whether in the form of mentorship, education, or even therapy, reinforcing a cycle of struggle.

### **Redefining Success: A Collective Perspective**

If the self-made narrative is a myth, how should we think about success? Instead of glorifying individual achievement as an isolated act, we should recognize success as an inherently collective effort.

This means acknowledging the role of privilege, but also valuing collaboration, mentorship, and support networks. Rather than viewing reliance on others as a weakness, we should see it as an essential part of growth. It also means shifting societal values away from hyper-individualism and toward a recognition of shared responsibility—understanding that creating more equitable opportunities benefits everyone.

Public policies, for example, should reflect this understanding. Rather than cutting educational funding or social programs under the assumption that people should “make it on their own,” governments should invest in access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities. Societies thrive not when individuals compete in isolation, but when they support one another.

At a personal level, redefining success means embracing collaboration. Instead of viewing mentorship, networking, or even privilege as things to be hidden or downplayed, we should acknowledge them openly. Doing so not only creates a more honest narrative about success but also encourages others to seek the support they need.

### **Rethinking Success: From Myth to Reality**

The self-made myth is a compelling but deceptive story—one that oversimplifies the complex web of factors that contribute to success. Hard work and talent are undeniably important, but they are never the sole ingredients. Social support, access to education, luck, privilege, mentorship, and systemic factors all play significant roles in shaping opportunities. Recognizing this reality does not diminish individual achievement; rather, it allows for a fuller, more honest understanding of how success happens and how we can create more equitable paths for others.

By challenging the myth of the self-made person, we can move toward a world that values collaboration over competition, acknowledges the importance of equity, and creates opportunities for all—not just those lucky enough to have the right starting conditions. Instead of asking, “Who built this on their own?” we should ask, “Who helped make this possible, and how can we do the same for others?” The answer is always more collective than we might think, and embracing this truth can lead to a fairer, more just society. □

# Echoes of the Ancients

## A Journey Through Myth and Self

Brynja Haraldsdóttir



Illustration: Oleh / Adobe Stock

**T**here are moments in life when standing still feels impossible, when the walls of routine begin to close in, and the only way forward is to leave everything familiar behind. That was how I felt before booking my one-way ticket to Greece. It wasn't just wanderlust that pushed me; it was something deeper, a restlessness, a need to untangle the questions I had been avoiding. Who was I when stripped of my routines, my relationships, my

expectations? Could I trust myself to navigate the unknown?

Greece called to me not just for its landscapes or history but for its stories. The myths I had read as a child were filled with seekers, warriors, and exiles who found themselves through trial and transformation. Perhaps, in tracing their steps, I could find my own path. And so, with nothing but a backpack and a heart full of uncertainty, I set off on a journey that would change me in ways I could not yet imagine.

### Arrival in Athens – Standing at the Threshold

**T**he air is thick with heat and the hum of a restless city as I step out of the airport and into the heart of Athens. The weight of my backpack presses into my shoulders, but it's nothing compared to the invisible weight I carry inside. I've come here alone, seeking something I cannot quite name—an answer, a revelation, or perhaps just the courage to stand on my own.



*The Temple of Athena Pronaia in ancient Delphi stands as a serene monument to the pursuit of wisdom and self-understanding. Situated at the foot of the majestic Mount Parnassus, the temple was dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and was a place where travelers sought guidance from the Oracle of Delphi. Opposite page: Athena's Sacred Olive Tree alongside the Erechtheion near the Parthenon on Acropolis Hill in Athens.*

The taxi winds through the narrow streets, past graffiti-covered walls and balconies spilling with bougainvillea. In the distance, the Acropolis looms, its marble columns glowing in the late afternoon sun. It is my first glimpse of history standing still, watching over the city like a silent guardian. It is also my first realization that I, too, am standing at the threshold of something vast and unknown.

### **The Acropolis and the Weight of the Past**

The climb to the Parthenon is steeper than I expect. I follow a winding path of stone steps worn smooth by centuries of pilgrims, philosophers, and seekers. Tourists move around me in a steady stream, cameras clicking, voices rising in different languages. But as I ascend, a hush settles within me.

Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, once had this city in her divine grasp. She was the patron of scholars and warriors alike, those who sought knowledge and those who fought to protect it. As I stand

before the Parthenon, I wonder what she would think of me—a young woman on her own, caught between a longing for wisdom and the fear of an unknown future.

A fellow traveler, an American woman in her thirties, strikes up a conversation. We sit on a ledge overlooking the city, watching the rooftops stretch toward the horizon. “It’s funny,” she muses, “how ruins like this make you think about your own life. About what lasts and what falls apart.” I nod, feeling the weight of her words. Maybe that’s why I’m here—to learn how to make peace with both.

### **Seeking an Oracle Within**

A few days later, I take a bus to Delphi, a place where ancient Greeks once sought the wisdom of the Oracle. The journey winds through olive groves and rugged hills, the kind of landscape that seems unchanged for thousands of years. When I arrive, I walk the Sacred Way, following the same path that countless seekers took before me, hoping for guidance.

The ruins of the Temple of Apollo stand against a backdrop of mountains, their silent grandeur still holding an air of mystery. The Oracle, a priestess known as the Pythia, once inhaled sacred fumes and spoke in cryptic messages, her words interpreted by priests. People traveled from all over the ancient world to hear her prophecies, desperate for direction.

I close my eyes and imagine stepping into that temple, offering my own question to the gods. What would I ask? What is my purpose? Where am I meant to go? The wind stirs around me, whispering through the ruins. And then, the realization strikes: The Oracle never gave direct answers—only riddles that forced people to find their own truths. Perhaps that is what I must do, too.

### **Shedding Old Layers**

From Delphi, I make my way to Piraeus and board a ferry to the Cyclades. The sea stretches endless before me, shifting between sapphire and turquoise. I lean against the railing, the wind tangling my hair, and feel a strange lightness.

Santorini is my first stop, and its cliffs, shaped by ancient volcanic eruptions, feel like a symbol of destruction and rebirth. I wander through the whitewashed alleys of Oia, the sun painting the walls gold. In a quiet moment by the caldera, I think about the parts of myself that need to crumble to make room for something new.

Next, I find myself in Naxos, drawn to the Portara—a massive, unfinished doorway from an abandoned Temple of Apollo. It stands alone against the sky, leading to nowhere and everywhere at once. I run my fingers over the cool marble and think about the projects, dreams, and relationships in my life that have been left unfinished. Maybe not everything needs a perfect ending. Maybe some things are meant to be left open, like a door waiting for the right moment to be walked through.

### **The Modern Sirens and Mentors**

Traveling alone does not mean being alone. At a small taverna in Paros, I meet a fisherman who tells me, between sips of ouzo, that patience is the key to everything—whether it’s fishing or life. “You cast your line,” he says, “and you wait. The sea gives when it wants to give.”

On the ferry to Mykonos, I share a table with another solo traveler, a French woman who has been on the road for years.

“Independence isn’t about having no ties,” she tells me. “It’s about knowing that, wherever you go, you are whole.”

In a quiet village in Amorgos, I meet an elderly woman who tells me an old myth I had forgotten—the story of Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus but later found by Dionysus. “Sometimes what feels like an ending is just the beginning of a better story,” she says with a knowing smile.

### Returning to Athens Changed

When I return to Athens, I retrace my steps through the city. The Acropolis is still there, unchanged, but I am not the same. I no longer look at the ruins and see only the weight of the past—I see resilience, the way time erodes but also reveals.

I climb to the top of Filopappou Hill at sunset, watching the city shift from gold to indigo. I realize that I no longer need an Oracle to tell me the future. I no longer need Athena’s wisdom to justify my choices. The myths of the ancients still whisper, but now they are a chorus reminding me that I have always had the strength to find my own way.

### The Journey Continues

As I prepare to leave Greece, I know I am taking more than just memories with me. I am taking lessons carved into marble and echoed in the sea breeze. I am taking the stories of strangers who became guides along my path, the wisdom of myth



Santorini’s iconic blue-domed churches overlooking the island’s volcanic caldera and the Mediterranean Sea.

woven into the fabric of my own unfolding story. I have learned that independence is not about isolation but about trust—in myself, in the unknown, in the ever-changing nature of life.

The ruins of the past have taught me that nothing truly disappears; it transforms, takes on new meaning, and continues to shape what comes next. Like the Parthenon standing proud despite time’s erosion, I now see that my own struggles and uncertainties

are not signs of weakness but markers of growth. The Oracle of Delphi reminded me that the answers I seek are already within, waiting for me to listen. The unfinished doorway in Naxos showed me that some journeys do not have definitive ends; they remain open, inviting me to step through whenever I am ready.

As the plane lifts off, carrying me away from the land of gods and legends, I do not feel like I am leaving something behind. Instead, I feel as though I am carrying Greece with me—the resilience of its ruins, the wisdom of its myths, the quiet strength I discovered in myself. The journey does not end here. Like Odysseus, I will keep moving, not because I am lost, but because there is always more to discover—in the world, in history, and in myself.

### Looking Ahead

I do not know my next destination yet, but that is the beauty of it. The world is wide, full of echoes waiting to be heard, and I am ready to listen. I am taking lessons carved into marble and echoed in the sea breeze. I am taking the stories of strangers and the quiet truths I have uncovered within myself.

The journey does not end here. Like Odysseus, I will keep moving, not because I am lost, but because there is always more to discover—in the world, in history, and in myself. □



Traditional greek vivid lilac colored tavern on the narrow Mediterranean street on hot summer day.

Photo: Igor Tichonov / Adobe Stock

Photo: Diak / Adobe Stock

# The Sound of Silence

Iris Monroe



Photo: Nick Starichenko/Adobe Stock

Lucy's pulse quickened at the knock on the door. The silence outside was so complete that the sound felt like an intrusion. It was as though the quiet had been broken, splintered by that one, sharp knock. She stood frozen, unsure of whether she should open it, but the instinct to know more, to understand what was happening, pushed her forward.

She opened the door cautiously, but no one was standing on the porch. Instead, there was a small, tattered piece of paper lying on the doormat. It looked as if it had been placed there with care, its edges curled and stained by the elements.

Lucy bent down and picked it up. The paper was old, its surface yellowed and fragile. She unfolded it carefully, as though it might crumble in her hands. Written in an uneven, hurried hand were the words:

"The silence will take you. It is already inside. Trust no one."

Lucy's breath caught in her throat. Her mind raced, her thoughts jumbled. Who had left this note? And why was it so cryptic? The fear she had been trying to suppress was creeping up, clawing at her from all sides.

She turned around to step back inside, but as she did, she saw something that made her blood run cold.

At the edge of the yard, just at the edge of the forest, a figure stood. It was a man—tall, impossibly still, as if frozen in place. His face was hidden in shadow, but Lucy could feel his eyes on her. She didn't need to see his face to know he was watching her. His presence was like a weight, heavy and oppressive.

Without thinking, she slammed the door shut and locked it, her heart pounding in her chest. She backed away from the door. The whispering had stopped, but the silence was worse than before. It pressed in on her, suffocating, closing in from all sides.

Minutes passed, though it felt like hours, and Lucy tried to convince herself that the figure had just been a trick of her mind. Maybe it was the stress, the isolation, the darkness. But deep down, she knew better. Something was very wrong in Raven's Hollow.

Unable to sit still any longer, she grabbed her jacket and headed out the door. She had to find answers. She had to understand what was happening before the silence swallowed her whole.

The town was different at night. The streets were empty, and even the few lights that dotted the town's corners seemed dim and faint, casting long shadows that made the houses appear like hollowed-out shells. Lucy had no clear destination in mind, but something—some force—pulled her toward the center of town.

As she walked, the oppressive silence weighed on her like a physical force. She passed the library, the empty diner, and the post office, all dark and abandoned. She reached the center of town, where the old church stood, its spire rising like a finger pointed to the sky. The air around it was thick, as though the building itself was holding its breath.

Inside, the church was silent, except for the faint sound of dripping water from the roof. The pews were worn, the wood dark and chipped. She walked down the aisle, her footsteps echoing, the sound oddly amplified by the silence that enveloped everything. In the front, the altar was shrouded in darkness. But what caught her attention wasn't the altar—it was the walls, lined with faded portraits of people she didn't recognize.

Then she saw it. At the back of the church, near the rear entrance, was a small door, barely visible in the shadows. It was ajar.

Lucy hesitated, her breath shallow in her chest. Every instinct screamed at her to turn back, but something deeper inside her urged her forward. She had come this far. She had to know.

With one final, shaky breath, she descended into the unknown.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, spiraling down into the earth. The air grew colder the farther she went, and the whispering grew louder, more distinct. The words were clearer now, forming an almost coherent message.

\*"Help us. Save us. The silence is our prison."\*

At the bottom of the stairs, Lucy found herself in a small, dimly lit chamber. The walls were lined with old stone, and there was a faint smell of dampness in the air. In the center of the room was an altar, similar to the one above, but this one was different. This one was covered in symbols—strange, arcane marks that pulsed with an unnatural energy.

As Lucy stepped closer to the altar, her heart skipped a beat. The air around her seemed to ripple, and she heard a voice, deep and hollow, speaking directly to her.

\*"You've come to understand, haven't you? You've come to learn the truth."\*

Lucy's breath caught in her throat. She didn't know where the voice was coming from, but it filled her mind, drowning out her thoughts.

\*"This town, this place, was never meant to be. It was born from a pact—one made in desperation, in fear. The silence is its curse, and it feeds on the souls of those who remain. We are trapped in its grip, and we cannot escape. Not until it claims its due."\*

Lucy's mind spun, her thoughts unraveling. What was this place? What was the force behind the silence? And why had it chosen Raven's Hollow?

Suddenly, a figure appeared before her, emerging from the shadows. It was the man from earlier, but he was no longer a silent observer. His face was gaunt, hollowed, as if his very soul had been drained by the silence.

\*"You should have stayed away," he whispered, his voice rasping. "Now, you will be like us."\*

Lucy staggered back, panic rising in her chest. The man's eyes were hollow, empty, and in them, she saw the truth. He was one of the town's lost souls, trapped by the silence, by the curse that had bound the town for centuries.

Before she could react, the room grew colder still. The whispers escalated into a deafening roar, and the walls seemed to close in around her. The altar pulsed with dark energy, its symbols glowing faintly, as though feeding off her fear.

Lucy's mind raced. She had to get out. She had to escape before the silence consumed her, too.

But it was already too late.

The man moved closer, his steps deliberate and slow, the shadows clinging to him like a shroud. Lucy's breath quickened, her heart pounding in her chest as she backed away from the altar. The air felt thick, like syrup, and every movement was weighted with the terrible certainty that escape was slipping further out of reach.

"Please," she gasped, her voice barely audible over the cacophony of whispers. "I don't understand. What is this place?"

The man's hollow eyes glowed faintly, his mouth curling into a smile that wasn't a smile at all. It was the twisted reflection of something that had long since lost its humanity. "You don't understand because you were never meant to. This is the price for your curiosity. Raven's Hollow is cursed, and so are we. The silence feeds on us, year after year, until there's nothing left but husks."

Lucy's mind swirled, each word like a needle driving deeper into her thoughts. She was drowning in the weight of it all—the curse, the silence, the town's dreadful secret. How had she not seen it before? How had she walked into this trap so blindly?

The whispers seemed to rise up, a unified chorus, each voice pulling at her sanity. \*Help us. Save us. Save yourself.\*

But there was no saving anyone now. Not from this.

The man's fingers twitched, and for a moment, Lucy thought he was going to reach out to grab her. She couldn't wait any longer. She turned and bolted, her shoes slapping against the cold stone of the chamber floor as she sprinted toward the staircase.

Behind her, she heard his voice again, louder now, carrying the weight of all the voices in the town, the voices of the lost souls who had once lived normal lives, but now were nothing more than echoes of fear.

"You can't run, Lucy. It's already inside you. It's in you."

Lucy didn't stop. She couldn't stop. The whispers followed her, chasing her up the winding stairs as if the very stone of the church had come alive. She gasped for breath, her legs burning with exhaustion, but she kept climbing. She had to make it to the surface. She had to escape.

The cold air of the church hit her like a slap when she finally reached the top, and she staggered through the open door, blinded by the sudden flood of light from the streetlamps outside. She ran into the night, her feet pounding the dirt road, her mind racing with fear.

But as she ran, something was wrong. The air around her had changed. The silence. It was returning.

She stopped in her tracks. The night had become too still, too quiet, as though the world itself was holding its breath.

Her heart pounded in her ears. She turned slowly, glancing behind her.

The town was gone.

Where there had once been houses, there was now nothing but an endless expanse of blackness, like a void that stretched into infinity. The streetlights flickered and died, one by one, until only shadows remained. The church was gone, and the woods that had once surrounded the town were now just an indistinct blur of dark shapes.

She was alone.

"Lucy..."

# City in Blue

Mikkel Sørensen

Neon spills onto wet pavement,  
spreads like oil on water—  
electric, endless, alive.

A girl in a red jacket smokes by the curb,  
watching cars slide past like ghosts  
with nowhere to haunt.  
Her reflection trembles in the window,  
half-here, half-gone.

Inside the diner,  
someone stirs sugar into their coffee,  
watching it dissolve like time.  
The jukebox hums a song no one listens to.  
A man at the counter counts his change,  
a quiet prayer in silver and copper.

Above it all, the sky swallows light,  
leaving only a low hum,  
the city's heartbeat,  
pulsing through the wires.

---

The voice came from all directions, surrounding her, filling the space. It wasn't just the man anymore. It was everyone. The townsfolk. The souls trapped in the silence. It was them, reaching out to her, their voices mingling with the wind, rising like a storm.

"You can't escape it," the voice whispered. "The silence is in you. It's already inside."

Lucy's blood ran cold. She could feel it now—the suffocating pressure, the presence that was following her, not in the physical world, but in her mind. The curse had already taken root.

She stumbled backward, her knees giving way beneath her. The darkness around her seemed to draw closer, pressing in, until it was all she could see, all she could feel.

Then, in the center of it, a shape emerged.

A figure. The same man. His face was still hollow, his eyes black pits of despair, but now, there were others with him. The lost souls of Raven's Hollow, their faces contorted in fear and agony, their mouths moving but no sound coming out.

They were all trapped, just as the book had said. They were prisoners of the silence, and now, Lucy was joining them.

She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. The air around her seemed to freeze, the world locking her in place. The whispers grew louder, swelling to a deafening roar, until her head throbbed with the sound of it. And then, just as the world around her seemed to shatter, there was one final whisper, one that cut through everything.

\*Save us.\*

It was a cry for help, one that Lucy couldn't ignore. But it wasn't just for her. It was for everyone. It was the sound of the curse, the force that had consumed the town, the evil that had been fed for generations.

And just as it seemed that the darkness would swallow her whole, something broke inside her. Something fierce and raw, something that she hadn't known she still had.

Lucy screamed, a primal, guttural sound, the kind that came from the depths of her soul. She pushed against the silence, against the force that had tried to claim her, her voice fighting back the waves of whispers that surged around her. The ground beneath her trembled, and for the briefest of moments, she felt a connection to the town's forgotten past—a glimmer of light in the all-consuming dark.

And then, suddenly, it stopped.

The silence shattered.

Lucy gasped for air as the world around her snapped back into focus. She was no longer in the void, no longer surrounded by shadows. The town of Raven's Hollow was there again, standing as it had before, quiet and still in the dead of night. The streetlights flickered back on, casting their soft glow on the quiet streets.

She was standing at the edge of the town square, her chest heaving, her hands trembling. The people of Raven's Hollow were there, too, all of them, standing like statues in the night, their eyes empty and staring.

They were waiting.

But Lucy knew what she had to do. The curse, the silence, the evil that had plagued the town—it wasn't just going to end. She had to face it head-on. She had to break the cycle.

And she would. Even if it meant sacrificing herself to do so.

With a final glance at the silent figures around her, Lucy took a step forward, ready to face whatever came next.

The silence wasn't just something that could be fought—it was something that had to be faced, and only then could it truly be broken. □

# Plain Vanilla

## The Joy of Simple, Basic Foods

Margot Delaney



**I**n a world brimming with exotic ingredients, intricate recipes, and culinary trends that change almost as quickly as the seasons, there is something quietly profound about the humble pleasure of plain, simple food. “Plain Vanilla” — a term often used to describe something ordinary or unadorned — also serves as a reminder of the understated joy found in the basics of our culinary experience. There is a nostalgia in simplicity, a satisfaction in knowing that sometimes, less really is more. In our haste to seek out novelty, we often overlook the delicious beauty of food at its most basic.

### The Timeless Appeal of Simplicity

**A**t the heart of basic foods lies the wisdom of the ages. Think of the simple delight of a slice of bread, still warm from the oven, or the comforting bowl of porridge, its aroma

filling the morning air. There’s an inherent warmth in these foods, a sense of grounding that connects us to the past, to our ancestors who, often out of necessity, relied on simple ingredients to nourish themselves.

Bread — one of the oldest foods known to humanity — remains a staple in almost every culture, a symbol of sustenance and comfort. Yet, no matter how often we seek the latest trends in cuisine, it is the classic, unadorned loaf that never fails to satisfy. Whether it’s the crusty exterior of a French baguette, the soft, pillowy middle of a pita, or the warm slice of sourdough, bread in its most basic form holds the power to calm and console.

### The Comfort of Familiarity

**O**ne of the most significant pleasures of basic foods is the comfort they pro-

vide. Think of the ritual of preparing a bowl of macaroni and cheese — not the gourmet, truffle-infused kind, but the classic version made from a handful of pantry staples: pasta, butter, milk, and a good, sharp cheese. The taste is familiar, almost nostalgic, and each bite is a reminder of simpler times, free from the pressure of impressing anyone. It’s food that invites us to slow down, to enjoy the moment, and to savor something that needs no embellishment.

The appeal of foods like mashed potatoes, boiled eggs, or a plain rice bowl is rooted in their simplicity, but also in their versatility. They provide a blank canvas for personal expression, whether it’s a dash of salt, a drizzle of olive oil, or the warmth of freshly cracked pepper. These foods don’t demand attention; they quietly nourish us, offering an uncomplicated, satisfying meal.



## The Subtle Joy of Taste

In many ways, the joy of basic food lies in its ability to bring out the essential flavors of its ingredients. While gourmet dishes often rely on complex techniques and layered flavors, simple foods invite us to experience the pure, unadulterated taste of what we're eating. A fresh apple, crunchy and sweet, is a world unto itself. A perfectly ripe tomato, with just a sprinkle of salt, is a moment of summer on the tongue. A bowl of oatmeal, plain and unsweetened, has the earthy warmth of morning itself.

There's also something undeniably satisfying about the process of preparation. The rhythm of chopping vegetables, the sizzle of eggs in a pan, the steam rising from a pot of soup — these small actions provide a sensory experience that connects us to the food in a way that elaborate meals sometimes don't. The joy is in the act of cooking itself, as much as in the eating.

### A Rejection of Overcomplication

In an age where food is often designed to be Instagrammable and elaborate in ways that verge on the absurd, the simplicity of plain vanilla foods feels almost revolutionary. These unassuming dishes stand in contrast to the high-stakes culinary spectacle that defines modern food culture. There's an honesty in their lack of pretense, an invitation to just be present with the meal, without the need for external validation.

Plain vanilla foods offer a break from the pressures of perfection and sophistication. They remind us that food is, at its core, meant to nourish the body, to provide comfort, and to bring people together. We don't need the bells and whistles of a Michelin-starred experience to feel satisfied. Sometimes, all we need is a bowl of soup or a simple sandwich to feel that sense of contentment and well-being that food, in its simplest form, offers.

### Rediscovering the Pleasure of the Basics

In a world that often celebrates complexity, there is a quiet revolution happening in kitchens around the world: people are rediscovering the joy of plain vanilla. They're finding solace in simple meals that don't require a great deal of effort or flair. And in this rediscovery, there's a profound truth: the simplest things often bring the most joy.

The beauty of plain vanilla foods lies not just in their flavors, but in the space they create for connection. They're an invitation to slow down, to savor the moment, and to appreciate the basic pleasures that sustain us. Whether it's a plate of pasta, a bowl of soup, or a slice of pie, the joy of simplicity is timeless. Sometimes, in the search for the extraordinary, we forget that the ordinary — the plain vanilla — is exactly what we need. □

## Poetry

# Signal Lost

Mateo Lopez

The call drops in the middle of a sentence—  
not a goodbye, just static,  
the sound of distance stretching thin.

A neon Open sign flickers in an empty diner.  
A man stirs his coffee,  
watching the liquid swirl, then slow to nothing.  
The waitress stacks napkins into a perfect square,  
then ruins it with a single touch.

On the train, a man watches his reflection  
merge with the blur of the city passing by—  
a faint outline, flickering like the ghost of himself.  
A woman beside him mouths the words of a song,  
earbuds in,  
unaware her lips are moving,  
the rhythm of something she can't hear.

A dog waits at a door that never opens.  
A box in the hallway sits half-packed,  
a forgotten story.  
The phone buzzes,  
but no one picks up.

The streetlamp hums to no one,  
its light stretching long across the pavement  
where shadows gather and drift.  
At 3 AM, satellites whisper to each other,  
crossing paths,  
trading coordinates that no one listens to.

The world turns in its quiet chaos,  
a billion signals lost in the static.

# Musical Memory

## Why Songs Are So Closely Tied to Personal Experiences and Nostalgia?

Amanda Gustavson



Illustration: LanaSham / Adobe Stock

**M**usic has a unique and powerful ability to transport us through time. A song we haven't heard in years can suddenly bring back vivid memories—childhood summers, a first love, a heartbreak, or even a seemingly insignificant moment that had long been forgotten. This deep connection between music and memory is not merely a coincidence; it is a well-documented phenomenon rooted in psychology and neuroscience. Songs are more than just sounds; they act as emotional time machines, unlocking feelings and recollections with an immediacy few other stimuli can match.

One reason for this strong connection is the way music engages multiple regions of the brain simultaneously. The hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory formation, works closely with the amygdala, which processes emotions. When we experience a moment that is emotionally charged—whether joyful, sorrowful, or significant in some way—the brain encodes that moment more deeply. If music is playing during that experience, the brain forms strong neural links between the song and the associated emotions. This explains why hearing a specific song years later can suddenly trigger not just the memory of the event

but also the exact feelings we had at the time.

Moreover, the rhythm and repetition in music reinforce these connections. Unlike random sounds or spoken words, music has structure, patterns, and repetition that make it easier for the brain to process and store. This is why people with Alzheimer's or dementia, who may struggle to recall names or places, often remember and even sing along to songs from their youth. Music activates deep-seated neural pathways that remain intact even when other cognitive functions decline, demonstrating just how deeply embedded musical memories are in our brains.

# Algorithms of Longing

Diego Rojas

The glow of the screen  
 paints her face in electric light,  
 fingers scrolling through yesterday's memories,  
 through faces she once knew,  
 through a life that feels more real in pixels  
 than in the quiet hum of her apartment.

A notification flickers—  
 a like, a comment, a heartbeat in code.  
 She types, deletes, retypes,  
 crafting the perfect sentence,  
 as if words, arranged just right,  
 could open a door back to something lost.

Outside, the wind shakes the streetlights,  
 leaves scrape the sidewalk like static.  
 A couple walks by, laughing,  
 their closeness a thing not yet digitized.

She sets the phone down,  
 lets the silence settle  
 like dust in the spaces between thoughts.  
 Somewhere, a server saves her last search—  
 the ghost of a question, unanswered.

Another key factor in musical memory is nostalgia. Research has shown that people tend to form their strongest musical connections during adolescence and early adulthood, roughly between the ages of 12 and 25. This period, often described as the “reminiscence bump,” is when individuals experience heightened emotions, self-discovery, and personal milestones. As a result, the songs we hear during this stage of life become imprinted in our memories more strongly than those encountered later in life. This explains why a hit song from one’s teenage years can feel profoundly significant even decades later, evoking a sense of youthful energy and reminding listeners of their past selves.

Beyond personal memories, music also serves as a powerful collective memory trigger. Songs from specific historical moments—such as protest songs of the 1960s, anthems of the civil rights movement, or popular hits during times of war—act as shared cultural touchstones. A war veteran may recall the songs played on the radio during deployment, while someone who lived through the 1980s might instantly think of neon lights, cassette tapes, and dance floors upon hearing a signature pop hit from that era. Similarly, national anthems, religious hymns, and traditional folk songs serve as reminders of cultural identity, linking individuals to their heritage and shared past.

The effect of music on memory extends beyond just recalling past events—it also influences our present emotional state. Listening to a song tied to a happy memory can uplift our mood, while hearing a piece associated with heartbreak or loss can evoke deep feelings of melancholy. This emotional reactivation is part of what makes music such a powerful tool in therapy. Music therapy has been used to help people process grief, manage anxiety, and even rehabilitate stroke patients by stimulating brain function. The ability of music to bridge past and present emotions makes it one of the most effective forms of emotional expression and healing.

Ultimately, the relationship between music and memory underscores its profound role in human experience. Whether it’s a melody that reminds us of home, a song that takes us back to a lost love, or an anthem that connects us to a larger historical moment, musical memory acts as a bridge across time. It allows us to relive emotions and moments long after they have passed, reminding us of who we were and how far we have come. In a way, music doesn’t just accompany life—it preserves it. □

# In Defense of Having Absolutely No Hobbies

Eric N. Patel



**I**n a world obsessed with productivity and self-improvement, having hobbies is often seen as a moral imperative. Browse through social media, and you'll find countless people proudly sharing their sourdough starters, intricate knitting projects, or marathon medals. Society reveres hobbies as markers of a well-rounded individual—proof that you're not just a cog in the capitalist machine but also a vibrant, multidimensional person with passions and interests. And yet, here I stand, utterly hobbyless, wondering if the cult of hobbies is as virtuous as it's made out to be.

Let me clarify: it's not that I'm lazy or unmotivated. I work, I socialize, I engage with the world around me. But when it comes to that sacred realm of leisure activities—pastimes pursued purely for pleasure and personal growth—I draw a blank. I don't garden, paint, bake, or

crochet. I've tried, sure, but the enthusiasm never sticks. And while this might sound like a confession of failure, I'm here to argue the opposite: having no hobbies is not only fine but can also be liberating in its own way.

## The Pressure to Have Hobbies

**F**irst, let's examine the immense pressure to have hobbies in the first place. Hobbies are no longer just about enjoyment; they've become a form of self-branding. In a hyper-competitive world, your hobbies are a shorthand for your personality and values. If you're into yoga, you're zen and health-conscious. If you're a home brewer, you're creative and resourceful. Even the simplest activities, like hiking or reading, are curated and commodified for Instagram, complete with hashtags and aesthetic backdrops.

This pressure isn't just external; it's internalized. I've spent hours Googling "easy hobbies to pick up" or watching YouTube tutorials on calligraphy and pottery, only to feel defeated when I inevitably abandon them. The unspoken message is clear: having a hobby is not optional. It's a moral and social obligation. To lack one is to be, in some way, incomplete.

## The Myth of the Productive Hobby

**O**ne of the reasons hobbies are so celebrated is their supposed ability to make us better people. We're told that they relieve stress, boost creativity, and provide a sense of accomplishment. And while these claims aren't entirely false, they overlook an important nuance: not all hobbies are inherently fulfilling. Sometimes, they're just another item on an ever-growing to-do list.

Take, for example, the rise of the “productive hobby.” This phenomenon turns leisure activities into side hustles or showcases of personal growth. Baking isn’t just about making cookies; it’s about perfecting a recipe, documenting it on social media, and maybe even monetizing it through a YouTube channel. Knitting isn’t just for fun; it’s a craft to be mastered, complete with online tutorials and competitions. Even reading, a traditionally solitary and leisurely activity, has been co-opted by the productivity police, with challenges to finish 50 books a year or curate aesthetically pleasing bookshelves.

In this context, hobbies start to feel less like a refuge and more like unpaid labor. The expectation to excel at them, document them, and derive meaning from them can make them stressful rather than enjoyable. For someone like me, who tends to overanalyze and overcommit, the idea of a “productive hobby” is downright exhausting. If my leisure time starts to feel like work, is it really leisure at all?

### The Joy of Doing Nothing

Now, let’s talk about the alternative: **N**having absolutely no hobbies. On the surface, this might sound dull or even sad, but it’s surprisingly liberating. Without the pressure to fill my free time with meaningful activities, I’m free to simply exist. I’m free to watch trashy TV, take long naps, or scroll through memes without feeling guilty about “wasting time.” In a world that glorifies busyness and productivity, this feels almost rebellious.

There’s something to be said for the joy of doing nothing. In fact, science supports the idea that unstructured downtime is essential for mental health. Studies have shown that boredom and idleness can spark creativity and problem-solving. By allowing our minds to wander, we give ourselves the space to process emotions, reflect on our experiences, and recharge our mental batteries. These benefits don’t require a hobby; they simply require us to slow down and let go of the need to constantly achieve.

### Hobbies Are Not Universally Accessible

**A**nother overlooked aspect of the hobby discourse is that not everyone

has the time, money, or energy to pursue one. Hobbies often require resources—materials, equipment, classes, and most importantly, free time. For people working multiple jobs, caring for family members, or dealing with chronic illness, hobbies can feel like an unaffordable luxury.

The fetishization of hobbies also ignores the privilege inherent in having the capacity to pursue them. It’s easy to say that everyone should have a creative outlet, but it’s much harder to acknowledge that systemic inequalities make this unrealistic for many. By framing hobbies as a universal necessity, we risk alienating those who simply can’t prioritize them.

“For some, hobbies are a vital part of their identity. For others, they’re a passing interest or a seasonal indulgence.”

### Redefining Leisure

**P**art of the problem is the narrow way we define leisure. Society tends to value activities that are active, visible, and skill-based. But leisure can take many forms, and it doesn’t have to involve a tangible outcome. Watching a movie, daydreaming, or simply enjoying a quiet cup of coffee can be just as fulfilling as any traditional hobby. These activities may not produce a finished product or a shareable moment, but they’re valid forms of rest and enjoyment.

For me, leisure often means indulging in the little things: lying in bed on a rainy afternoon, rewatching a comfort show for the tenth time, or having a spontaneous conversation with a friend. These moments don’t fit neatly into the framework of hobbies, but they bring me joy and help me recharge. Isn’t that the point of leisure?

### The Value of Being Hobbyless

**B**eing hobbyless has also taught me to appreciate the beauty of simplicity. Without the constant need to fill my time

with structured activities, I’ve learned to be more present. I’ve learned to find contentment in the mundane: the way sunlight filters through my curtains in the morning, the sound of rain against the window, the first sip of coffee on a quiet Sunday. These small, unremarkable moments often go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of modern life, but they’re where I find the most peace.

Moreover, not having hobbies has forced me to confront the discomfort of idleness. It’s taught me to sit with my thoughts, to embrace stillness, and to let go of the need to constantly prove my worth through action. In a culture that equates busyness with value, this is a radical act of self-acceptance.

### The Case for Choice

**U**ltimately, the decision to have or not have hobbies should be a personal one. While hobbies can be wonderful sources of joy and fulfillment, they’re not a prerequisite for a meaningful life. We shouldn’t feel pressured to conform to society’s expectations or to use our free time in a way that’s deemed “productive.” Leisure is a deeply individual experience, and there’s no right or wrong way to approach it.

For some, hobbies are a vital part of their identity. For others, they’re a passing interest or a seasonal indulgence. And for people like me, who’ve tried and failed to cultivate hobbies, they’re simply not necessary. What matters is that we’re honest with ourselves about what brings us joy and that we resist the urge to compare our choices to others.

### Conclusion

**I**n defense of having absolutely no hobbies, I’d like to propose a radical idea: it’s okay to just exist. It’s okay to spend your free time however you see fit, without feeling the need to justify it to anyone. Life is already full of obligations, expectations, and pressures. Why add another one in the form of a hobby you don’t truly enjoy?

So, the next time someone asks about your hobbies, don’t feel ashamed if you don’t have an answer. Smile and tell them you’re hobbyless by choice. Embrace the freedom that comes with rejecting the cult of hobbies, and remember: you’re enough, exactly as you are, hobbies or not. □

# Under the Weather

Walter H. Thompson



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Lila's first thought, when she woke up, was that the rain hadn't stopped. The sound of it against the roof had become a kind of white noise, constant and lulling, but now it felt oppressive. She pulled herself upright in bed and looked toward the window. The glass was speckled with droplets, the sky a washed-out gray. It was Saturday—a day she usually liked. She worked part-time at the library during the week, and Saturdays were hers to stretch out, like pulling the kinks from a stiff neck. But today felt heavy before it had even started.

Downstairs, Alan was already up. She could hear the low murmur of the television, the sharp clink of a spoon against a cereal bowl. For the last few weeks, he'd been sleeping on the couch. They hadn't talked about it, hadn't labeled it as anything, but it

sat between them like a full suitcase waiting to be unpacked. She could smell coffee drifting up from the kitchen, and it felt like a small comfort, though it didn't belong to her. Alan liked his coffee black, bitter, undiluted. She preferred hers with cream, a little sugar, the way her mother had made it for her when she was too young to drink it properly.

She got out of bed, pulled on her robe, and padded down the stairs. Alan was sitting on the couch, his legs stretched out on the coffee table, a blanket bunched up beside him. The television was tuned to a fishing show. Men in rain gear were hauling in nets on a boat, their faces unreadable beneath the hoods. Alan didn't turn when she came in.

"Morning," she said.

He nodded but didn't look at her. "There's coffee."

"Thanks."

She went to the kitchen and poured herself a cup. She stared at the empty cream carton in the fridge for a moment before closing it. The sugar tin was almost empty, too. She used what was left and stirred the coffee absentmindedly, watching the grains dissolve. The rain kept on outside, steady, unrelenting.

Back in the living room, she perched on the arm of the recliner. Alan glanced at her briefly, then back at the screen.

"Still raining," she said.

"Yeah."

They sat like that for a while, not quite comfortable, not quite uneasy. The fishing show ended, and Alan clicked through the channels until he landed on a news segment. Something about a flood in another state. The river had risen overnight, and now whole neighborhoods were underwater. The footage showed people wading through the streets, carrying whatever they could salvage. A dog paddled beside a man holding a plastic bag over his head. Lila set her cup down too hard on the side table, and Alan glanced at her.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing. Just thinking about how miserable that must be."

"Yeah. Rough." He shifted, folded his arms. "At least we're not dealing with that."

She didn't say anything. She wanted to tell him that she felt like they were dealing with their own kind of flood, but the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she stood up and went to the window. The street outside was empty except for a few parked cars and a stray dog sniffing around a trash can. The rain blurred the edges of everything, made the world look smaller and farther away.

"We're out of cream," she said.

Alan made a noncommittal noise. She turned back to look at him. His face was pale, the kind of pale that came from being indoors too much. He used to play softball on the weekends, used to come home sunburned and smelling like grass and dirt. Now he spent most of his time on the couch, flipping through channels, eating out of cartons and bags. She couldn't pinpoint when it had started, this slow unwinding, but now it felt like it had always been there.

"I'm going to the store," she said.

# Gym Time

Heimir Steinarrsson

It's time to hit the gym  
and get rid of all that stubborn  
and noxious surplus weight  
I've been carrying around.

I am determined to get  
in shape and lose my belly  
and rid my aging body  
of every extra pound.

My goal is to gain muscle,  
build up a tapered torso  
and work out with a trainer  
to strengthen my physique.

My flaccid chest will broaden,  
my puny abs get bigger,  
and I will flourish with  
the right exercise technique.

I will begin tomorrow,  
or Monday at the latest,  
or maybe I'll start next week  
when I can pay half-price.

And when I go, I'll stick to it –  
not like last year, when I  
bought a full membership card  
but only went there twice.

"In this?"

"It's just rain."

She went upstairs to change, pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt. She tied her hair back, looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was thinner than it used to be, her eyes a little sharper. She couldn't tell if it was age or something else. Downstairs, Alan had stretched out on the couch, his eyes half-closed. She grabbed her keys and slipped out the door without saying goodbye.

The rain came down harder as she walked to the car. It dripped from the edges of her hood, soaked into her shoes. The grocery store was only a few blocks away, and she could have walked, but she didn't feel like getting drenched. Driving gave her a sense of purpose, even if it was only to buy cream.

Inside the store, it was quiet. The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly, and the air smelled like onions and floor cleaner. She wandered the aisles, picking up a few things they didn't really need: a loaf of bread, a bag of apples, a box of tea she liked but rarely drank. When she got to the dairy section, she stared at the rows of cream, each carton lined up neatly, as if the world outside wasn't coming apart. She picked one and held it for a moment before putting it in her basket.

At the checkout, the cashier smiled at her. She was young, probably a college student, with clear skin and a ponytail. "Rainy day," she said, scanning the items.

"Yeah," Lila said. "Doesn't seem like it's letting up."

The girl nodded, handed her the receipt. "Stay dry out there."

Lila gave her a polite smile and pushed the cart toward the exit. She put the bags in the trunk, got in the car, and sat for a moment, watching the rain streak the windshield. She thought about driving somewhere else, anywhere but home, but she couldn't think of a place to go. She turned the key and headed back.

When she got inside, Alan was still on the couch. He looked over as she set the bags on the kitchen counter.

"Get everything?" he asked.

"Yeah." She unpacked the groceries, put the cream in the fridge, the apples in the bowl on the counter. Alan got up and came into the kitchen. He leaned against the doorway, watching her.

"You okay?" he said.

She paused, her hand on the box of tea. "Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem... I don't know."

"I'm fine." She put the tea in the cupboard, closed the door. "Are you?"

He shrugged. "I guess."

She turned to look at him. His face was tired, his shoulders slumped. For a moment, she felt a rush of tenderness, an urge to reach out, but it passed as quickly as it came. She turned back to the groceries, folded the empty bags and tucked them under the sink.

"Dinner?" she asked.

"Sure."

They ate in silence, the rain still falling outside. Afterward, Alan went back to the couch, and Lila washed the dishes. She thought about the flood she'd seen on the news, the people wading through waist-high water, carrying what little they could. She dried her hands, turned off the light, and went upstairs. In bed, she lay awake, listening to the rain, waiting for it to stop. □



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