

The MANTELPIECE

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Disconnect to Reconnect

The Imperative of a Digital Detox

In an era where the hum of notifications and the glow of screens dominate our daily lives, the concept of a digital detox might seem like a quaint relic from a simpler time. Yet, as our dependence on technology deepens, the need to step away from our devices becomes not just a luxury, but a necessity. The modern individual, tethered to their smartphone and inundated with information, must rediscover the art of being present, of truly connecting with the world around them.

The notion of a digital detox is not about vilifying technology. After all, our devices have transformed our lives in countless positive ways. They connect us to distant loved ones, provide access to a wealth of information, and offer unprecedented convenience. However, the ubiquity of these devices has also created a paradox: the more connected we are digitally, the more disconnected we become from our immediate reality.

Consider the average day of an individual in the digital age. From the moment they wake up to the second they fall asleep, screens are a constant presence. Emails, social media updates, news alerts, and a plethora of apps demand their attention. Even in moments meant for relaxation, such as a quiet evening or a weekend getaway, the temptation to check one's phone can be overwhelming. This relentless barrage of digital stimuli not only fractures our attention but also chips away at our capacity for deep thought and genuine interaction.

The consequences of this digital saturation are profound. Studies have shown that excessive screen time is linked to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Our sleep patterns are disrupted by the blue light emitted by screens, and our cognitive functions suffer from the constant task-switching required by digital multitasking. Beyond the personal toll, there is a societal cost: the erosion of communal experiences, the

decline in meaningful conversations, and a collective shortening of our attention spans.

Enter the digital detox—a conscious, deliberate break from technology with the aim of reconnecting with the physical world. This practice is not a rigid, one-size-fits-all solution but rather a flexible, adaptable approach to managing our relationship with technology. It can take many forms, each tailored to individual needs and lifestyles. One common method is to set aside specific “screen-free” times each day, such as during meals, before bedtime, or first thing in the morning. This can help create a routine that prioritizes moments of undistracted presence and mindfulness.

“Digital detox is about balance. It is about finding harmony between the digital and the physical, the virtual and the real.”

For those seeking a more immersive experience, a technology-free retreat can provide a profound sense of renewal. These retreats can range from weekend getaways in nature to structured programs at wellness centers that offer activities like yoga, meditation, and creative workshops. The goal is to immerse oneself fully in the present, away from the constant pull of digital devices. One might start with small steps: a no-phones policy at the dinner table, a weekend hike without gadgets, or a daily hour reserved for reading a book made of paper rather than pixels. These intentional breaks from technology can help reset our brains, reduce stress, and improve our overall well-being. More importantly, they can

restore our ability to be present, to engage deeply with our surroundings and the people in our lives.

The benefits of a digital detox extend beyond personal health. For writers, artists, and creators, stepping away from screens can be a wellspring of inspiration. The quiet moments, the undistracted walks, the face-to-face conversations—all these experiences fuel creativity in ways that scrolling through a feed cannot. In the silence left by the absence of digital noise, new ideas can emerge, and the mind can wander to places of unexpected brilliance.

Moreover, a digital detox can foster a renewed appreciation for the tangible world. The tactile sensation of holding a book, the warmth of a friend's smile, the sound of leaves rustling in the wind—these simple pleasures, often overshadowed by our screens, come into sharp focus when we disconnect. By reclaiming our attention from the digital realm, we open ourselves to the richness of real-life experiences.

In advocating for a digital detox, we are not calling for a retreat into the past but for a mindful recalibration of our relationship with technology. It is a call to remember that we are more than the sum of our digital interactions, that our worth is not measured by likes and retweets. It is an invitation to embrace the world with all our senses, to engage fully with the present moment, and to rediscover the joy of being truly connected—to ourselves, to each other, and to the world around us.

In the end, a digital detox is about balance. It is about finding harmony between the digital and the physical, the virtual and the real. It is about remembering that while our devices can enhance our lives, they should not define them. So, let us take a step back, switch off our screens, and reconnect with the essence of what it means to be human. The world, in all its vibrant, analog beauty, awaits us. □ *L.H.*

Get Some Tail

Helen Lewis



Illustration: alicandy / Adobe Stock

THUMP THUMP THUMP
The house music pounded against the floorboards, a beating heart punctured by the sharp cackles and screeches of partygoers. The cacophony was only slightly diminished by the paltry barrier of a flimsy, splintering wooden floor and a beer-stained “Go Tigers!” rug.

The sounds of the party provided a blind audience to the show upstairs, with a discordant laugh track, applause, and gasps randomly accompanying the muted squelching of lips meeting and pulling apart.

Both lovers, the small dark-haired girl named Alice and the lanky blonde-haired boy named Alex, were too focused on their urgent, passionless kiss to notice.

Squishing his face against hers, swallowing her lips beneath his, he kissed her forcefully while his hands tentatively crept under the hem of her shirt, probing what lay beneath, anticipating a stalling hand or an exclamation of “stop” from her otherwise occupied lips. With no indication of distress on her end, he eagerly grabbed the shirt, pulling it over her head.

“Ouch.” she yelped, when it reached her face, treasonously snagged on the fresh nose piercing she’d gotten for her 18th birthday. He paused. With the white fabric obscuring her head, she was a faceless woman. She didn’t see his eyes wander down her body.

It was an excruciatingly long moment before she unhooked the shirt, releasing it to the floor. She peered at her chosen lover through beer goggles steamed up with her hazy state of intoxication. He was what, a senior, he’d said? Overcome by feelings of romance, her brain shrugged, spouting the poetry, *He’ll do*.

He sheepishly did away with his shirt exposing a body sparsely covered in hair. The kiss resumed; bare skin now pressed against bare skin, both slightly damp with a sticky sheen of sweat. She moved his hands to her breasts and for a moment he held them there limply. Overcorrecting for his initial timidity he gave them the stress-ball treatment, squeezing hardily.

Surprised, she bit his lip.

Hard.

Taking this as a good sign, he squeezed more vigorously.

Sparing her breasts, she grabbed his hands moving them to her lap.

“Can I?” He gestured towards her pants, misinterpreting why his hands were moved.

She nodded.

Fingers fumbled as if they had never met a button before. Putting him out of his misery she stood, shimmying off her blue jeans with ease.

He couldn't help looking.

Not at the sheer red underwear, with a cutesy pink bow in the front.

Not at the mostly naked body backlit by a bright orange lava lamp.

But what lurked behind her.

A red tail, long and scaly, swishing back and forth.

He hastily tugged off his pants.

Alice was only 15 when she met Marcus.

She'd had crushes before, but never truly felt crushed by them. The weight of her longing for Marcus pinned her down, making it hard to breathe. She was stuck, paralyzed. It was glorious and unbearable.

He was her older brother's friend. Not one of the idiots who stared blankly at her, “little sister” synonymous with “furniture” in their minds. Those friends would lounge mutely, in a slumped stupor while her brother yelled at her to get out of the way of the television. It was as if she were a bug on the screen, something to be flicked and rid of.

Marcus looked at her though. Right at her. Sometimes he smiled.

He started visiting her bedroom, a pink-ridden affront to masculinity that emphasized the gravel in his voice and the wide set of his shoulders.

Initially, he just stood in the doorway, asking general questions about her day, quick visits so the boys downstairs wouldn't miss him. Gradually, he moved to the corner of her bed, and things got more personal. He told her how beautiful she was, something she'd never heard from a boy. He said he wanted to take her out.

When he did, when they were sitting in the front seat of his car in an empty parking lot, moonlight filtering through a sheen of dirt on his front window, he told her he liked her innocence, and she felt special. Wanted. Wanting. He pulled her close, kissing her, his hand feeling the small of her back, unblemished. He smiled, telling her how special it was she didn't have a tail yet. How he wanted to give her one.

Even the mention of tails was enough to make her blush at the time. She never looked directly at his, a green tail, long and fat, with sharp scales jutting out.

From Family Education, she knew what it meant. You had sex, you grew a tail. The fact he had one scared her, in a stressful, and admittedly, kind of horny way. He was the first guy she'd ever kissed. She didn't know if she was ready for sex.

Caring and kind, he helped ease her nerves with shitty liquor straight from a bottle that he'd bought behind the dumpsters of one of the most unsavory gas stations in town. The bitter taste paralyzed her mouth, numbing her tongue and then her brain. She felt less and that felt good.

He kissed her, stroked her. She wanted more. The wanting was raw, steaming with heat. She was unprepared, with nothing to handle it, nothing to keep her from getting burned. Yet she held it tight, even as she felt blisters forming, growing, popping, hissing, the wanting fusing to a painful bloodied mess.

It wasn't that night they had sex. The night they did, the car was filled with smoke, and she just laid there too baked to make much of an effort. She didn't know it was the last time she'd see him.

The next morning, she saw a nub of a tail sprouting on her back.

Alex didn't know what was wrong with him.

The solidarity of blindly, lustfully wanting the same thing unified his friends who schemed endlessly to get their hands on the forbidden and therefore inevitable: the assets of their female counterparts.

Of course, he loved butts. And boobs. Taut navels and even, sometimes, smooth feet. He hoarded his fair share of illicit magazines under his twin bed, safely protected by his rocket ship sheets. And his

search history was a tribute to some of the internet's most grotesque niches of porn.

But more than anything, he wanted love. He wanted it so bad, that it hijacked his brain, clouded his thoughts, hallucinations of love transforming simple statements from women, like “Pass that beaker” or “Can I get through?” into statements of passion, permission from his victims of adoration.

A giddy, nervous, hummingbird of love, flitting in all directions, blurred and vibrating. He'd start with pining. Months of pining. Silently, hopelessly, falling.

Often on his face.

There was Maria who sat next to him in chemistry freshman year of high school. She had once laughed when he'd accidentally caught his sleeve on fire, and the glorious tinkling noise felt like the best present he'd ever unwrapped. He'd spent 6 months doing her homework, unaware she was spending her time chasing after the captain of the soccer team. When he found out, it felt like his heart had burst into flames.

There was Kristen who moved next door his sophomore year. They walked to the bus stop together for months, silently enjoying each other's company, and sharing the elaborate breakfast sandwiches her mom would send her out the door with. Then one day, she wasn't outside waiting for him, but rather in her new girlfriend's car. He declined the ride, walking alone, stomach grumbling as he gnawed on bitter feelings.

There was Tiffany, who had been homecoming queen four years in a row and had a pink puff of a tail that drove his male classmates wild. On Valentine's Day, she left a note in his locker, and he spent three weeks working up the nerve to ask her about it. When he did, her confusion and the echoing laughs of his friends behind him, made his face flush beet red, as he rushed to the nearest trash can, disposing of the fake valentine, now worn and wrinkled from how many times he had read it.

His friends feasted on his broken heart, pulling him apart piece by piece. Growing stronger in their frenzy with each bite. Drunk on it, eyes glittering like blood diamonds.

Unhappy, but fearing loneliness above all else, he grimaced and played along. He knew that his position in the group was “carcass”, and if he ever stopped playing dead, he would lose them.

He loathed them but he loathed himself more.

When Alice's mom saw her tail, she cried.

Alice cried too.

She cried when it first started sprouting, an elongating bump, treasonously slithering out of her body, unstoppable, apparently. She'd googled “how stop tail growth” and had tried every result, with one method causing her to smell like garlic for a week and another resulting in shooting buttock pain every time she sat down.

She cried herself crazy when Marcus texted her that it was over. The text was coldly written, poorly written, somehow riddled with more lies than misspelled words. He blamed needing to be a better friend to her brother, citing “bro-code” with the solemnity of a priest referencing the 10 Commandments. Her response was long-winded, oscillating from anger to pleading, and expletive-laden. He blocked her and never came by her house again.

If it hadn't been for her panic, she might have realized that she liked her tail. Her favorite shade of bright red, it was strikingly elegant. It was long enough that it could hit the light switch when she walked into rooms or even close doors behind her.

She tried to hide it at home. Her mother was so saturated in religion that excess prayers leaked through her pores. She cursed and muttered when she saw it while her dad avoided looking at it, ignoring her when she tried to ease the tension, by commenting on its strong resemblance to his own.

Girls at school venomously hissed “Sssslut” when she passed them

Grief

Fabrice Poussin

in the hall. She'd been carefully changing for gym, taping the tail to her leg, wearing baggy pants that fit under. But they'd been predators longer than she'd been prey, knowing what signs to look for when a girl got her tail. They smelled her from miles away and were quick to pounce and dismember.

She cried when her best friends threw a sleepover and didn't invite her. Oscillating between judgment and jealousy, they were kind to her face, if only to get gossip. The way they whispered to one another, eyes darting quickly from her to each other, conveyed their message louder than a shout.

A pariah among women, she had never been more popular with men.

The weight of loneliness was an impossible burden to carry, one she had developed no muscles for. The hands of male classmates reached out, helping her lift the burden, sometimes for months at a time, sometimes for days.

It was often an exchange. Frequently a drunken blunder. She enjoyed the sexual intimacy, although she was ashamed to admit it.

With time, more classmates got tails. But no one forgot that she got hers first.

It wasn't until college that Alex realized love had blinded him. While he'd been chasing romance, his peers had been hunting for tails.

Painting him with pity, disdain, and judgment through the brushstrokes of patronizing words, his peer's lack of respect was obvious. It became clear: to be loved, he needed a tail.

He went to every party, drinking until he was sick, hoping to meet someone. The odd man out in his friend group, it was clear he was the least attractive option. They all had long scaly tails now, which they waxed and shined every day. The gravitational force of those bulging masses magnetized women, while his lack of tail repelled them. With slurred words, he tried to out-rizz and outplay his friends, losing pathetically night after night.

He became more desperate. He even called a prostitute named Charity, but after hearing her heaving, rasping voice, couldn't bring himself to be a case.

He went through a brief Christian faze, rebranding his lack of tail as purposeful but found Catholic church once a week wasn't worth the reprieve from ostracization.

The weight of having nothing was becoming too much to take. His heart, which had beat so loudly and passionately for so long was muffled by the want, acidic and painful, burning a hole in him, creating more nothing the longer it existed. It whispered threats, and it offered juicy temptation, he would be more popular, he would be loved, and he would be successful.

His notebook, which previously was full of love-inspired musings suddenly became a sketchbook with different tail designs. He wanted a cool one, with spikes and scales. He feared a knobby fluff ball like his cousin grew.

He became obsessed.

They sit on opposite sides of the bed, their backs facing each other. Slowly and quietly, they put on clothes, methodically discarded during their calculated romp.

She thinks about how she's going to pretend to use the bathroom. Wait until he makes it back down to the party and then descend the stairs innocuously, separately, so as not to tell a story.

He imagines grand applause as they head downstairs, hand-in-hand, a tunnel of high fives for him to run through with the whole party singing, "He's a jolly good fellow".

They get up, suddenly, or maybe, always, uncomfortable with each other's presence.

"Maybe we can do this again sometime?" He asks.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

They won't. □

A black hole as I have read about often
gaping before me reminds me of jolly times
when most things were bright and full
of color.

But something suddenly changed
with a long-distance call and a quick turnaround
as I too have so often made.

It was time I suppose for me to know
the void one leaves behind upon parting
unsuspecting of the hurt they may cause.

It is now December every day
August freezes in the balmy evenings
and I am all out of tears.

I stare at the trunk full of memories
anxious for glorious tomorrows
but it is now locked for good.

Within, a soul remains imprisoned
victim of its own shortcomings
shy to a fault, terrified to speak the truth.

Soon it may tilt into the dark abyss
and fall for eternity in echoing distress
unable to hold on to what could have been.

Guide to Political Posturing

Standing for Everything and Nothing

Eric N. Patel

In the chaotic arena of modern politics, mastering the art of posturing is crucial. Politicians are expected to take firm stances while simultaneously appealing to everyone. This ultimate guide will teach you how to expertly navigate the delicate balance of standing for everything and nothing at the same time.

Master the Vague Statement

The cornerstone of political posturing is the vague statement. It's crucial to speak in a way that suggests commitment without actually committing to anything. Phrases like "I believe in progress" or "We need change" are perfect examples. They sound decisive but are open to interpretation, allowing you to align with various viewpoints without being pinned down.

Embrace the Buzzwords

Buzzwords are your best friends. Terms like "freedom," "justice," "innovation," and "sustainability" are powerful tools. They evoke positive feelings but are broad enough to be nearly meaningless. Sprinkle these words liberally throughout your speeches and statements to create the illusion of a strong, clear stance.

Utilize the Rhetorical Question

Rhetorical questions are a brilliant tactic. They give the impression that you're addressing issues head-on without actually providing solutions. Questions like "Who doesn't want a better future for our children?" or "Shouldn't we all strive for peace and prosperity?" are effective in conveying concern and engagement while sidestepping specifics.

The Art of the Anecdote

Anecdotes are powerful. Sharing personal stories or experiences humanizes you

and connects with your audience on an emotional level. However, ensure your anecdotes are generic enough to be relatable to a broad spectrum of people. For example, "I met a hardworking single mother who just wants the best for her kids" can resonate with many, without requiring a concrete policy response.

Non-Committal Promises

Make promises that sound promising but are non-committal. Say things like, "I will work tirelessly to explore all options" or "I am committed to considering every

“By mastering these techniques, you can successfully navigate the complex landscape of modern politics, standing for everything and nothing simultaneously.”

possibility.” These statements suggest dedication and hard work without tying you down to specific actions or outcomes.

Deflect and Redirect

When faced with tough questions, deflect and redirect. Acknowledge the question briefly, then pivot to a topic you're more comfortable discussing. For example, if asked about a controversial policy, you might respond, "That's an important issue, but what we really need to focus on is improving our education system." This tactic helps you maintain control of the narrative.

The Power of the Platitude

Platitudes are your go-to phrases that sound profound but say very little. Examples include "We need to come together as a nation" or "We must build a brighter future." These statements are difficult to disagree with, yet they don't require any substantive policy positions.

Avoid Direct Answers

Direct answers can be dangerous. They can alienate potential supporters and lock you into a stance you might later regret. Instead, practice the art of the non-answer. If pressed, respond with, "I understand the concerns, and I'm working on a comprehensive solution." This shows you're attentive without committing to specifics.

Consistent Inconsistency

Be consistently inconsistent. Change your tone and emphasis based on your audience. What you say at a business luncheon should differ slightly from your speech at a labor union meeting. This flexibility allows you to appeal to different groups while maintaining a broad base of support.

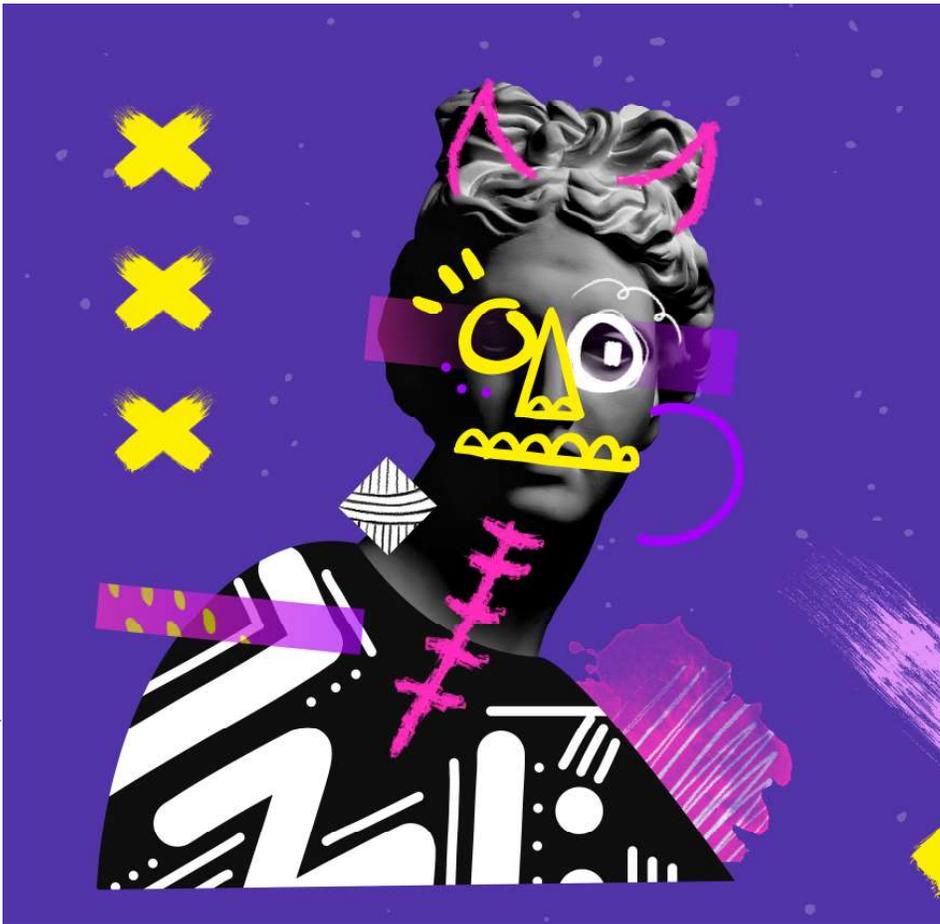
Blame and Credit

Take credit for positive outcomes and deflect blame for negative ones. If something goes right, even if you had little to do with it, highlight your involvement. Conversely, if things go wrong, attribute the failure to external factors or previous administrations. This tactic helps preserve your image as an effective leader.

By mastering these techniques, you can successfully navigate the complex landscape of modern politics, standing for everything and nothing simultaneously. This balance ensures that you remain appealing to the widest possible audience, securing your place in the political arena for years to come. □

Postmodernism and the Fragmentation of Narrative

Eleanor Jiménez



Illustrations: LustreArt Group / Adobe Stock

The landscape of contemporary literature is undeniably shaped by the principles of postmodernism, a movement that challenges traditional narratives and structures. Central to postmodern literature is the fragmentation of narrative—a technique that disrupts linear storytelling and conventional plot progression. This essay explores the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism and how the fragmentation of narrative serves as a critical tool to reflect and critique the complexities of modern existence.

The Philosophical Foundations of Postmodernism

Postmodernism emerged in the mid-20th century as a critical response to the grand narratives and overarching ideologies that defined modernism. The movement was profoundly influenced by the philosophical critiques of thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. These philosophers challenged the prevailing notions of absolute truth, objective reality, and universal meaning that had underpinned modernist thought.

Jean-François Lyotard, in particular, is renowned for his assertion of the “end of metanarratives.” He argued that the grand, unifying stories that once provided coherence and meaning to societies had lost their credibility in a world increasingly characterized by diversity and fragmentation. Lyotard’s perspective was that in a pluralistic society, these grand narratives no longer held the same explanatory power or legitimacy they once did, as they failed to account for the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives present in contemporary life.

Michel Foucault’s work further deconstructed the idea of objective reality by examining how power relations shape knowledge and truth. Foucault contended that what we consider to be “truth” is often a construct of dominant power structures, which manipulate knowledge to serve their own interests. This critique undermined the notion of an objective reality that can be universally understood or agreed upon.

Jacques Derrida, through his theory of deconstruction, questioned the very foundations of meaning in language and text. He argued that meaning is always deferred, never fully present or fixed, leading to an endless play of interpretations. Derrida’s ideas further destabilized the concept of universal meaning, suggesting that all texts are open to multiple, often contradictory interpretations.

The philosophical skepticism towards grand narratives and fixed meanings found a parallel in the literary world, giving rise to a movement that embraced ambiguity, paradox, and multiplicity. Postmodern literature, reflecting these philosophical insights, often rejects the idea of a single, cohesive storyline. Instead, it favors fragmented, non-linear narratives that better capture the uncertainties and discontinuities of contemporary life.



In postmodern literary works, the narrative structure is frequently disjointed, with events presented out of chronological order, multiple perspectives interwoven, and metafictional elements that blur the line between fiction and reality. These techniques serve to disrupt traditional storytelling conventions, encouraging readers to engage with the text in a more active and interpretative manner.

By embracing fragmentation, postmodern literature mirrors the fragmented nature of modern existence, where certainty and stability are elusive, and multiple, competing realities coexist. This narrative fragmentation is not merely a stylistic choice but a thematic one, reflecting a deeper understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition in the contemporary world. Thus, postmodernism in literature becomes a powerful vehicle for exploring and expressing the fragmented, pluralistic nature of modern life.

Fragmentation of Narrative in Postmodern Literature

The fragmentation of narrative is a hallmark of postmodern literature, manifesting in various forms such as disjointed timelines, multiple perspectives, and metafictional elements. These techniques serve to undermine the traditional expectations of coherence and unity, inviting readers to engage with the text in a more active and interpretative manner.

Postmodern narratives frequently eschew chronological order, presenting events out of sequence to disrupt the reader's sense of time. This technique reflects the fragmented nature of human memory and experience. For instance, Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" employs a non-linear structure to convey the protagonist's perception of time as fragmented and disordered, mirroring the trauma of war.

By presenting multiple, often contradictory viewpoints, postmodern literature challenges the notion of a single, authorita-

tive narrative. This multiplicity of perspectives highlights the subjectivity of truth and the complexity of human experience. William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying" is a seminal example, where the story is told through the interior monologues of various characters, each offering a different interpretation of events.

Metafictional elements, where the text self-consciously acknowledges its own artificiality, are common in postmodern literature. This technique blurs the line between fiction and reality, prompting readers to question the nature of storytelling itself. John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" is a quintessential metafictional work, where the narrative frequently draws attention to its own construction and the act of writing.

Thematic Implications of Fragmented Narratives

The fragmentation of narrative in postmodern literature is not merely a stylistic choice but a thematic one that reflects the disintegration of certainty and meaning in the contemporary world. These narratives often explore themes of existential uncertainty, identity crisis, and the fluidity of reality.

The fragmented narrative structure underscores the postmodern condition of existential uncertainty. Characters in postmodern works often grapple with a sense of dislocation and a lack of coherent identity, reflecting broader societal anxieties. In Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49," the protagonist's search for meaning in a seemingly arbitrary and chaotic world epitomizes the existential plight of postmodern individuals.

Fragmented narratives frequently depict characters experiencing an identity crisis, where their sense of self is unstable and multifaceted. This mirrors postmodern theories of identity, which reject fixed, essentialist notions in favor of fluid and constructed identities. Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" explores the frag-

mented identity of its protagonist, whose life is intertwined with the tumultuous history of post-colonial India, illustrating the complex interplay between personal and national identities.

By disrupting conventional narrative structures, postmodern literature often portrays reality as fluid and subjective. The blending of reality and fiction in these works suggests that what we perceive as reality is, in fact, a construct shaped by language and narrative. Jorge Luis Borges' "Ficciones" exemplifies this theme, where stories within stories and labyrinthine plots challenge the very notion of a stable, objective reality.

Future Perspectives

The fragmentation of narrative in postmodern literature is a profound reflection of the philosophical tenets of postmodernism. By rejecting linearity, embracing multiple perspectives, and incorporating metafictional elements, postmodern authors dismantle traditional storytelling conventions to explore deeper truths about the human condition. This narrative fragmentation not only mirrors the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary life but also invites readers to engage in a more active and critical interpretation of the text. In doing so, postmodern literature remains a vital and dynamic field that continues to challenge and expand our understanding of narrative, identity, and reality.

Looking ahead, the influence of postmodernism on literature suggests a future where storytelling will increasingly embrace diversity, ambiguity, and innovation. As we move further into the 21st century, the themes and techniques pioneered by postmodern writers will likely evolve, intersecting with new cultural, technological, and social developments. This ongoing evolution promises to keep literature a rich and ever-expanding landscape, offering fresh insights and challenging our perceptions in new and unexpected ways. □

Homecoming

Lillian Heimisdottir



Illustration: Jennie Pavl / Adobe Stock

Carmen Luna was what you might call a minor celebrity. She was an actress who had appeared on TV shows and had played some small roles in feature movies. Mostly she was known for her connection to other famous people and her frequent affairs with affluent men or sports stars. You could see her frequently depicted on the covers of the *Prensa rosa* – the gossip magazines here in Spain.

Now she had landed a supporting role in an American movie, set in Spain, directed by a famous independent filmmaker, and the media was all over her. Carmen Luna, the new international movie star. They made quite a fuss about her and wherever

you went, you could see her smiling from billboards and advertising posters.

I was working as a freelance journalist in Barcelona, sending my stuff to several English speaking outlets, and on a whim I had contacted Carmen Luna’s agent and asked for an interview and a photo-shoot with Spain’s newest favourite personage. I really hadn’t expected an answer, let alone that she would agree to meet me, but to my surprise the agent called me back and said that Carmen Luna would like to take us to the small town of Muvieja, where she had been born and raised. It was a two hour drive from Barcelona into the mountains and we would go the following weekend, and be there for the annual Fiesta, which

would serve as an authentic background for the photo-shoot. Naturally I was enthusiastic about this idea, which the agent told me was entirely Carmen Luna’s wish.

“She is so excited to meet with the English journalist,” the agent had said. “She looks forward to seeing her interview in the Guardian. Or was it the Times?”

“Yes, one of those,” I had responded, remembering having, in my pitch to the agent, listed some large newspapers, where I had submitted pieces on and off, but forgot to mention that I hadn’t sold the interview yet. If I wouldn’t be able to peddle the piece, I might end up publishing it on my own website.

We arrived in the town on the morning of the Fiesta, after having driven through the mountains. Our journey from Barcelona to Muvieja was like a voyage into the past. The closer we came to the village, the bumpier the roads became and the landscape turned barren. We drove into a mountainous region and the climate became rougher. Spain is, after Switzerland, Europe's most mountainous country, even though many associate the country only with beach holidays despite offering a wide range of unmatched natural landscapes.

"Beautiful place. Muy bonita." I said to Carmen Luna as we stepped out of the minibus.

"Yes, it is very beautiful," she replied. "Small, but beautiful." She looked around the place as if she were somewhat surprised at the smallness of it.

I too had expected the town to be bigger. It was hardly more than a village, with a few houses, a church and a small square and the town hall. Everything looked as if it had been built sometimes during the Middle Ages and the whole town had something medieval about it.

People were busy decorating the place for the evening. Flags were hung on buildings and colored streamers were put up on street lights and between houses. Some men came carrying large flower pots and put them on the edge of the square. They looked occupied and excited. A group of women with lots of young children stood at the other end of the square. They had stopped their activity when they saw us arrive and now they were watching us and talking among themselves. Carmen Luna waved to the group, but only a few children waved back. The women just stood there and watched us.

A young man from Carmen Luna's agency and a woman who acted as her assistant and stylist had joined us for the trip and were now taking in the view. The young man had introduced himself as Roberto Diaz, but I didn't know the name of the assistant. She was of an uncertain age and not very talkative. In fact, I hadn't heard her say a single word up to that point.

"I will go up the *Ayuntamiento* – the municipal office and tell them we're here," Roberto Diaz said, but there was no need for him to go inside, for the windows on the second floor opened and a large man looked outside and waved.

"That's the Alcalde," Carmen Luna said. "The mayor of the town. I know him from when I was a child."

A moment later the Alcalde stepped out of the main entrance of the *Casa Consistorial*, followed by some subordinates.

"Carmen Luna," he exclaimed and threw his arms up in exaggerated greeting. "The great actress has come to grace us with her presence."

Everything about this man was exaggerated and overdone. His voice was too loud and his smile was too big and too flashy. His eyes were cold and calculating. But Carmen Luna greeted him like a long lost friend and practically threw herself in his arms. Then she introduced us, and told everybody that I worked for a major newspaper and was writing an article about her that would be published in my home country. The Alcalde was clearly impressed and told me to write nice things about his town. I said I would and he seemed pleased.

"Es un pueblo muy bonito," I said to show off my Spanish, and the Alcalde laughed and replied in English that he agreed that it was a very beautiful town.

I took a few photos of Carmen Luna with the Alcalde and then he said:

"Very well, I have to leave you now. I have a lot of things to do before the Fiesta begins tonight. You enjoy your stay in the beautiful Muvieja."

"You have to go?" Carmen Luna asked. "I thought you were going to accompany us on our tour through the town."

The Alcalde laughed again and told us he had no time today for being a tour guide. "But I see you at the festivities tonight, I hope."

"Yes, of course," Carmen Luna said and looked a bit disappointed as the Alcalde and his subordinates turned to go back to their work.

Carmen Luna posed for a few more photos in front of the Town hall. Then she walked over to the other end of the square, where the women and children were decorating the podium and the tables. I followed a few steps behind, and not sure if she wanted me to come with her, I pretended to take pictures of the church.

The women stopped their work when they saw Carmen Luna come over to them. I noticed some of them seemed weary and pulled their children close to them.

"Hola, Carmen," one of the women said. She had a hard face and did not smile or show any signs of cordiality. "You're back in Muvieja?"

"Just for a day. We are making a photo-shoot during the Fiesta."

"Yes, I heard about the movie you're in," another woman said, and showed a timid smile.

"Hola, Marisol," Carmen Luna said, and smiled back at the woman. "How have you been?"

"Fine. I'm married now. To Jorge, the son of the Innkeeper. And I've got two children." She nodded at the boy and the girl standing next to her. "They're five and seven."

"That's great. Congratulations," Carmen Luna answered and waited for any of the other women to say something.

But nobody said anything else and after a short while the first woman, the one with the hard face, turned back to her work, muttering something harsh under her breath. The other women also went back to what they were doing. The woman called Marisol smiled timidly at Carmen Luna, then she too turned away and went back to her work.

Evening came and now the square was alive with music and full of people dancing and drinking. It was a small Fiesta, but a nice one. Everybody was enjoying themselves and it was clear that this was the major event of the year in this small town. All the inhabitants, young and old were gathered to celebrate together. Nobody stayed home on a night like this.

At the largest table, the one with the most opulent decorations, sat the Alcalde with his family and friends. He had clearly been drinking a lot and was in high spirits. He spoke very loudly as if he wanted to make clear that this was his town. When he saw Carmen Luna he rushed to her and dragged her to the middle of the square, where the people were dancing on an elevated platform that served as a dance floor. Everybody made place for them and they danced together in the center of the crowd. Carmen Luna enjoyed the attention she was getting, and for the first time since we came to Muvieja she looked happy and relaxed. She smiled at the people around her and waved to the bystanders.

When the music stopped, the Alcalde kissed Carmen Luna. He kissed her right on the mouth and the kiss lasted probably too long, for people began to whistle and shout all kinds of profanities. Even the band on the podium played a racy tune. When he finally let her go and walked back to his table, everybody cheered for him and some of the men clapped him on the back.

Carmen Luna was still standing on the platform, smiling at people and enjoying

Two Poems

Juleigh Howard-Hobson

The Elemental

Once I thought I saw you, a glimpse, a blur
 shimmering in the shadowy grey made
 by an ash tree as the sun began to
 set. I thought the light caught you, standing there,
 regarding me. But as leaves stirred, wind played,
 there was nothing there. Did I notice you
 for that second, or was it merely some
 interplay of light and dark, of branch and
 leaf, that resembled who I think must be
 often hidden by the trees? You've become
 a constant companion, unseen, unplanned
 unbidden, but more comfortable to me
 than my other neighbors now. Never mind
 that I've never met you, I like you fine.

Shade

Who hasn't felt the pleasure shadows bring,
 the quick relief
 from unrelenting heat, the cool blurring
 of greyed air. Grief
 has no place in shadows. Though it's been said
 that ghosts like shade
 I do not think the melancholy dead
 do. Sorrow's played
 out in painful ways, the velvet ease of
 a shadowed spot
 holds rest and satisfaction. Sunshine's rough,
 it burns too hot
 and hurts what is exposed to it. Life dries
 out beneath the glare, covering its eyes.

what she took for her moment in the sun,
 when the hard-faced woman we had met
 this morning walked up to her.

The woman looked her in the face and
 then spat on the ground.

"Put a," she said, loud and clear for
 everybody to hear. Then she turned and
 walked away.

There was a moment's silence, then the
 crowd burst out in a roar of excitement and
 perplexity. The men shouted and laughed
 but some of the women only smiled
 viciously.

"The old hag's crazy," somebody yelled,
 while others seemed to be on her side. The
 word *Put a* – Whore – was heard repeatedly
 through the racket.

The agent's assistant, Roberto Diaz,
 rushed up to the dance floor and led her
 back to our table.

"You're alright?" I asked.

"Of course. Why shouldn't I be?" She
 took a glass of wine and drank it in one
 gulp. Roberto Diaz filled the glass again
 and this time she drank it a bit slower. She
 looked over at the Alcalde's table, but the
 friend from old days seemed preoccupied
 with his companions and ignored the
 commotion completely. Maybe he hadn't
 noticed what just happened.

"Let's go," Carmen Luna said suddenly
 and stood up.

The fiesta was far from being over, in
 fact it had hardly even begun and I had
 been hoping to get more pictures of her
 during the evening.

"What about the *Torro de Fuego*? And
 the fireworks?"

"Forget the fireworks. Actually, forget
 this whole town. Let's go!"

We followed her to the minibus and
 drove off, back to Barcelona. Nobody
 spoke on the way back. There wasn't much
 to see either, since it was dark outside
 and no streetlights along the road. When
 we came to the city, the driver dropped
 me off at my apartment. I said goodbye
 and promised to send her my article before
 publishing it.

"Whatever." She didn't say goodbye or
 even look at me.

Days and weeks went by. I finished
 the story and ended up selling it to some
 online magazine for a few hundred Euros.
 I did send the article to Carmen Luna's
 agency, but never got a response from
 them. The last thing I heard of her was
 that she was making commercials again
 and that she had an affair with a local talk-
 show host. □

The Buried Dreams of Baba Rhea

Lawrence Winkler



Photo: Tryfonov / Adobe Stock

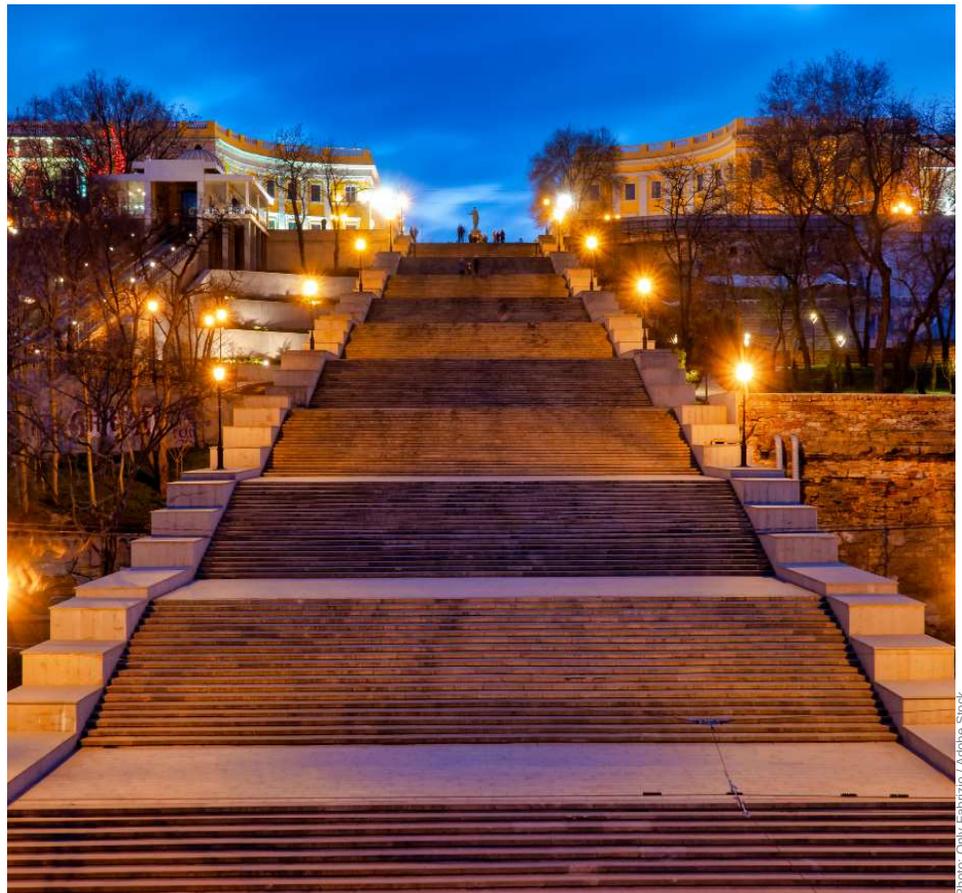
A long time ago in a faraway place, lived a pretty four-year old girl. The town was too, with tree-lined cobbled streets, sun-reflected Baroque townhouses, and a crystalline atmosphere, that always reminded her that the sea was at the bottom of the hill. Something horrible came off that sea, however, that bleached the colors from her childhood memories. A ship of the King mutinied, in support of an unsuccessful peasant revolt. The King crushed the uprising mercilessly, for he understood its potential. The townspeople roamed the streets in frustrated anger. They looted, raped and killed neighbors who had lived with them for centuries. People who believed they had finally found a haven after 2000 years of forced migrations.

Frightened by the violence, the parents of our four-year-old girl decided to leave their home, for a land across the sea. They sold their possessions to buy steamship passage, and carried what they could. The salt of the sea dispersed the salt of their tears. But their souls were still there, a long time ago in a faraway place. The pretty four-year-old girl grew up in an alien land, in a language without soft curves. Her parents had traded cold-blooded neighbors for a cold-blooded climate. She married a young man of her tribe, a butcher, bore him two children, and worked hard to give him what had been taken from her when she was young. Her husband died early, slowly and in pain, leaving her to raise their daughters alone and in poverty. She lived to see a grandson, the first child of her youngest

daughter, walk and talk and do well in school. She loved to make tea, teach him card games, and buy him toys she could ill afford. When she died in quiet dignity, she had perhaps forgotten that town, with the tree-lined cobbled streets, sun-reflected Baroque townhouses, and a crystalline atmosphere, that always reminded her that the sea was at the bottom of the hill. But her grandson had not. Seventy-seven years later he arrived on a morning train. He walked her cobbled streets, silently admired her townhouses, breathed her air, and came to understand the soul of a pretty four-year old girl, now buried in a distant land. And he was very happy, and very sad. The salt of the sea had dispersed the salt of her tears. But her soul was still there, a long time ago in a faraway place.

It was the tuberculosis. The reason she used so much face powder. The tuberculosis had affected her cheeks. Baba Rhea looked like a kabuki doll. The card game we played was called kaluki. She would make tea, and we would settle in for another long tournament of kabuki kaluki. She chained smoked *duMaurier*. You could tell when she was cheating by how hard she inhaled, and the pattern of her exhaust. If her vapor trail came out long and straight, she was worried. If it billowed in clouds, she had a good hand. I used to ask myself what kind of grandmother would cheat her own grandson playing cards. The answer wasn't in the old sepia photograph of her before she got the tuberculosis. She was a stunning Venus of baroque Romanoff Russian elegance, with round cheeks and cats eyes, and the jewelry that would eventually disappear, into other parts of the family. She wouldn't have cheated at cards. Then came the Potemkin uprising and the pogroms and the starvation and the tuberculosis. All her university professor uncles were shot.

She crossed the Atlantic from a cosmopolitan city in a Mediterranean climate, to a Canadian prairie conurbation forty below zero, the point at which Celsius and Fahrenheit were the same temperature. All the joys of life were frozen there, and she found herself, after all that distance and time and energy, once again surrounded by Ukrainians. My grandmother was from Ukraine. It was difficult for her to speak about the place or the people, and I could sense her antipathy, on those rare occasions when she did. The ambivalence came from the other part of its history. It took her 34-year-old husband six months to die of his colon cancer. My own mother told me she could never forget the smell. My father's mother was cold to Baba Rhea, colder than the climate. When I was born, Baba Rhea tied a red ribbon around my little finger, to ward off the evil spirits that she thought were still chasing us. Six years later, she bought me a space gun when I asked her to. It took as many of those big batteries, just to make the noise and sparks that came out of it. My parents were horrified at what she paid. She said it didn't matter. And that's when I started to let her win. So she would billow clouds instead of inhaling hard. So she wouldn't have to cheat.



The famous Potemkin stairs in Odessa, now called the Primorsky Stairs
Previous page: Monument to Duc de Richelieu in Odessa, erected in 1828..

It was just the way she had described it. I started at the bottom of the stairs. Originally the Boulevard steps, the Giant Staircase, or the Richelieu steps, they're now called the Primorsky Stairs. When I climbed them, they were still the Potemkin Stairs. Like the Mediterranean architecture, the staircase is an optical illusion. From the bottom you can see only stairs; from the top, only landings. They seem longer looking up because they're wider at the bottom. An English criminal fugitive, John Upton, constructed them. The Trieste green sandstone that Baba Rhea walked on, had been replaced by rose-grey granite, and the landings covered in asphalt, but the harbor view expanded in the same way as I climbed into the sunshine.

"You must be from ship. Change money?" Came from over my shoulder.

At the top of the stairs was the bronze statue of Armand Emmanuel Sophie Septimanie de Vignerot du Plessis, 5th Duc de Richelieu. Richelieu had been on the wrong side of the French Revolution. One of Marie Antoinette's dragoons, he became the *Premier Gentilhomme de la*

Chambre, for the daily *lever* and *coucher* rituals of Louis XVI. When it all went sideways in France, Richelieu went to work for Catherine the Great, who had taken the Ottoman fortress of Khadzhibei, in the Russo-Turkish War of 1792, and founded Odessa on the site two years later. She made Richelieu Governor, before he eventually became Prime Minister of France. He was Baba Rhea's connection to Catherine the Great and Marie Antoinette. And mine.

Maybe I just wanted to see it through Baba Rhea's eyes, but I did. There were influences of French and Italian Art Nouveau, Renaissance, and Classicist, in Odessa's mélange of streets and arcades. I inhaled the cosmopolitan air that Pushkin described as 'filled with all of Europe,' and exhaled it in billowing clouds. Lenin with love songs. Russian Riviera. I wandered the most romantic place in the USSR.

Old painted English letters sat fading, on the ground level red-trimmed windows of a white brick building I passed.

'O. S. Brown Steamship Agents.' I wondered if they had brought her.



The Opera house in Odessa. The building was constructed in neo-baroque style and opened in 1887.

Down Primorsky Boulevard were the Naval and Archeological Museums, with a nice Egyptian collection in the latter. I came to the Italian Baroque Opera house, with a large arched red, white, and black mural of Lenin in its upper colonnade, facing the sea. Lenin and I would both be gone the next day.

The Opera house had been managed by the medical inspector, who would announce fictitious epidemics, and quarantine newly arrived passengers at their own cost, whenever ticket sales were low. The luxurious rococo hall acoustics could deliver a whisper to any part of the theatre. The Edison Company had supplied the novel electric illumination, and, during the hot summers, wagonloads of ice and straw would be dropped down a 35-foot shaft, to subterranean vents beneath the seats.

In 1819 Odessa had been made a free port and, despite the Soviet stranglehold, the shops up and down Beribasovskaya were still well provisioned.

As I strolled around Odessa at dusk, I tried to imagine how anyone who lived in

this kind of light, could raise a voice or a hand in hatred. But for that, I could have been born and still living here, now all buried dreams.

My last breakfast in the USSR was a rerun of my first. It was as if they knew they could just stop trying. I was back in the land of white bricks and nyet. No matter what I asked Olga for, she didn't have any. Judging by the size of her, I may have been just too late. I left a kopek tip. After confirming my late afternoon departure with the disservice desk, I went up to my room to find the very same kopek on my bureau. You would be forgiven for thinking that an organization operating at this level of efficiency, couldn't come up with an egg and a cup of coffee.

The day before I had walked down Yevreyskaya, *Jewish Street*. Today I was determined to see Baba Rhea's synagogue. Odessa had an important Jewish community during the 19th century, and by 1897 Jews comprised almost forty per cent of the city population. It became a hotbed of intellectual activity, and one of

the birthplaces of the Zionist movement. The reason for that was simple. There were pogroms in 1821, 1859, 1871, 1881 and 1905. The Tsarist police would disarm Jewish self-defense units, to clear the path for Ukrainian murderers.

Despite this, in Russian culture, the Jews of Odessa were viewed as sharp-witted, streetwise, and eternally optimistic. They undoubtedly cheated at cards. They had their own dialect, of wise and subtle dissension, and opportunism, that unwittingly pointed out the flaws and absurdities of the Soviet regime. The Jew in the jokes was an endearing character, and always prevailed against adverse circumstance. During the first six months of Nazi occupation, eighty percent of the 210,000 Jews in the region were killed, along with the folklore. The blackness of the Black Sea overflowed into the city.

I walked a few blocks, before asking a taxi driver to take me to the Synagogue. He pulled up beside an iron-spiked metal fence, behind which stood a nondescript Gothic gray building. There was no one

at the powder blue guard post booth. I walked in through the open gate. It seemed deserted.

Then I caught a whisper of mournfulness, on the wind. Every so often, with a change in breeze direction, I would catch a few notes of liturgical Yiddish music. I followed it, around corners and passageways, expecting to emerge, at any moment, onto a plain of piety. Instead, I tripped right into a 1920's backroom Chicago mob scene. I had to rub my eyes, to make sure they weren't lying to me. Seated, around a big rectangular table, were eight gangsters with peaked hats and pin stripes, chain-smoking Marlboros. At the head of the boardroom, was the boss, with the Sanyo tape player and the pinkie ring. No one looked up. The pinkie finger went up, a sign for me to wait. I waited.

When the song ended, the pinkie pressed the stop button on the tape player, and everyone turned his gaze to me.

"Shalom aleichem." I said.

"Aleichem shalom." I got back. I was in the right place, after all.

In the ultimate historical irony, we only had German in common. The boss was the de facto leader of the synagogue, but he was not an ordained rabbi. He told me that, despite still having a population of 100,000 coreligionists, Odessa still had no *rebbe*. I asked him how he resolved religious issues. He told me he had a telephone. He called Moscow. His hero was Meyer Lansky. We were clearly in trouble. They took me into the main part of the synagogue. It was beautiful. In this room Aleichem's fictional character, Mendel, came to plague God with unanswerable questions. In this room Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov were influenced by the music they heard. In this room was the only voice of hope, during the chaos of the Soviet Civil War, from 1918 to 1921. The painted sun over the ark had come a long way. I left a donation. They left me with the same word they had left me with in every synagogue I had visited in the Soviet Union. Мир. *Peace*. It was just 'Shalom,' in Russian. Hard to come by.

I returned to the Intourist desk at Hotel Chornoye More, to reconfirm my émigré status for that evening.

"What were your impressions of the synagogue?" She asked. You can't play Russian roulette if all the chambers are loaded.

The young peach who accompanied me to the train station was new on the job. She



The old Jewish Cemetery at dawn.

asked me not to make her nervous. I told her she would have to stop being so beautiful and bought her a citron. My compartment contained the Chernovtsky party commissar and his entourage, so I elected to spend my time in the restaurant car. It was here I met the waiter, Alex, ex-boxer, ex-soldier, ex-exponent of humor and outrage. He was graphic in his description of his exploits with the blushing waitress. He brought me a large bowl of almost inedible goat noodle soup. Even more unfortunately, he opened a bottle of Stolichnaya, and brought two glasses. I asked him if he was allowed to drink on the job. There was nothing I could do to make him understand the question. We laughed through the sunny richness of Moldova.

I arrived in Kishinev and spent four hours watching the tanks go by. Inside the station was a carnival freak show, a geneticist's dream. My last twenty kopeks procured an amazing meal of smoked salmon, beef stroganoff, and coffee.

What I hadn't known about Kishinev was that two years before Baba Rhea's family experienced the Potemkin pogrom, the Russian anti-Semitic newspaper, *Bessarabian*, published a blood libel incitement. The day following Russian Easter, local priests led a mob on a well laid out plan of riot and murder. 'Kill the Jews!' echoed through the streets. The Jews were taken unaware and slaughtered like sheep. Babies were literally torn to pieces. By

sunset the streets were piled with corpses. The massacre went on for three days, and no authority interfered with the brutality. The Nazis shot surviving relatives, and the next generation, thirty-five years later.

I couldn't believe the sumptuousness of my compartment, on the train to Romania. Everything that protruded was baroque gold ornate; everything that didn't was regal red. They clearly wanted me out of the country and were willing to escort me out with bourgeois accoutrements. The bed was pure marshmallow, but I wasn't going to use it much. At midnight, Natasha brought me forms to fill in, and told me to dress for the party. An hour later the Moldovan Good-Cop-Bad-Cop duo rapped on the door. While the Good-Cop expressed geysers of peace and friendship, Bad-Cop went through everything I owned. He searched the cabin so thoroughly; I couldn't have hidden a doubt. Good-Cop left, only to return with a guestbook for me to write impressions of my trip. While Bad-Cop took apart and reassembled one of the light fixtures, Good-Cop regaled me with his Cuban friendship missions, and the guiding light of Communism in world history. Meanwhile, Bad-Cop had found Sasha's Moscow address. I never did find out how that one ended, but I hoped for the best. They reopened the guestbook as they were leaving. I could tell they were puzzled with what I had written. It wasn't much. *Baba Rhea*. □

The Year of Bourdain

Nick Perry



Photo: creativecommons

I missed Anthony Bourdain. While he was alive, I never read a sentence of his prose, saw a second of his shows, or heard the low rumble of his voice. Even during my own four-year tour in the industry, his material didn't find its way to my bar as a means of consolation or connection. He was simply there, like an old restaurant in your hometown. The kind of place that you only remember when you pass by and even if you're sure it might be good, it never occurs to you to step inside and dine. There are always trendier and nearer spots and, besides, a place like that, it'll be there forever. If it only presented itself as appetizing enough to enter.

I also live my life by yearly themes. Like so many of my best ideas, I got it from someone else: YouTube's education sensation, CGP Grey. This idea that I now proselytize only on occasion does away with the rigidity of a New Year's Resolution and instead asks the person to pick a resonant word to inform their upcoming year. Whatever the theme, the goal is to recognize when, during the course of our lives, we the opportunity to make a choice and then making that choice based on what is in-line with our aspirations. It's been said that perfection is lots of little things done well and in thinking of the year in terms of themes, I've come to notice those little

things live in mundane choices that individually are almost nothing but cumulatively become significant. In thinking this way, a beautiful blend of freedom and boundaries is afforded.

At the end of last year I hadn't yet decided on my theme for 2023. Until, scrolling through Crave, I passed by the documentary "Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain." New years are about novelty, and I had known him to be important to my generation, so I clicked with no hope greater than filling the time of an unstructured evening.

The movie works as a kind of oral biography in which Bourdain's friends, colleagues, and others from his orbit work chronologically through his life. From his surprisingly well-off upbringing, to starting in the grottos of his first kitchens, and through the voyages brought about by his writing and television work, Bourdain was a busy guy. Interspersed with each of his life's settings would be set-backs, addictions, tiny successes, and the right kind of luck. I went in not knowing anything about who he was and, when it had finished, I had most of my facts learned but not my resonance. This movie was not a complete course of the man. The kind of experience that fills the viewer with enjoyment and leaves them stunned for more. I closed the app with a touch of emptiness at its conclusion.

If it had been about anyone else, I think I would have left him behind. The movie was a competent work of entertainment, making it easy enough to forget and continue living without the concave imprint that great art leaves on the chest. Yet, his life was one that had left that very mark across the bodies of so many people I knew. They, who had taken to their little slivers of social media, wrote as eloquently as they could to say something about the severed connection they felt when he died. It wasn't only the kids who drove expensive cars to high

school, though it was some of them, and it wasn't only the burnouts that had fallen into the jobs they may have for the rest of their lives. This unpredictable array, this classless combination of people united in mourning over this one American was what I thought of amidst the documentary's ending. Perhaps a single ninety-minute documentary wasn't enough to encapsulate the character of Bourdain and perhaps my own lack of understanding kept me from latching on to the most seminal moments of the film.

Watching that documentary was like looking at slides of strangers on vacation. The sights were beautiful and each image developed with the same inherent, human

poetry to be found in any of the moments of halted time. But the connection was missing. The linking line that says I not only recognize the beauty of the image but I also understand the humanity within it. I wanted to make that understanding real, I wanted to know what Anthony Bourdain could offer my life as he had apparently offered so much to many. There, my theme had presented itself to me. 2023: the Year of Bourdain.

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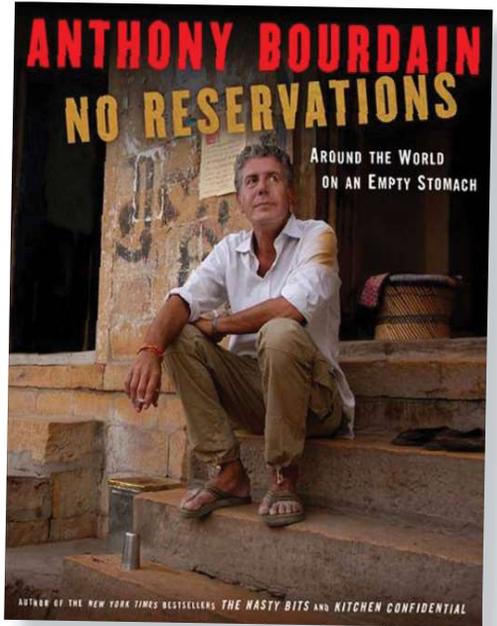
To get to know Anthony Bourdain through his work is primarily a two-pronged effort: there's his writing and his television. While I went into both simultaneously, without the book, the man never would have been. If someone ever deserved their reason for fame, "Kitchen Confiden-

cial" is a damn good one. The book breaks from the clean whites and organized pots of television representation of cooking that were so popular in its era. It offers no recipes or glossy images of finished dishes, and speaks neither with the voice of a mother nor a jolly Frenchman but a brutal street-punk who quips as often as he smokes.

Bourdain's kitchens are tight, hot, pressurized environments that are as unthankful as they are unrelenting. No matter the success of the previous day — or even the previous hour — every time an order comes through the cook has to assure that the same quality is delivered every time. If not, the effects of the cook's incompetence are immediately felt in waves across the kitchen. They are so tied together in their efforts that those who are late or slow or inattentive effectively kibosh any hope at a decent day's work for everyone else. And how is the cook to maintain such order? Through rigorous practice since there exist no molds, no mechanics to ensure this control outside of a device to make perfectly julienned carrots. Only the hands of an overworked, gaunt, and scarred person make these dishes possible. Time is everything in these places and it needs to be controlled. As such, one learns to be obsessive about time and order when being in Bourdain's kitchen. To never be late nor sloppy, and to feel good about being neither of those things. It's exactly the kind of writing that shocks guests and makes workers cheer.

While his name was made revealing restaurant secrets he would later denounce as being too local in place or time, or simply as untrue, Bourdain showed his immense talent for including details people would cling to. If a comparison is to be made to music, a book like "Kitchen Confidential" is on the level of Guns 'n' Roses's "Appetite for Destruction": it is a debut full of hits. Like those records of old, it's astounding how readable the book remains. I would have thought to read something like this from sometime like then, I'd be reading more of a time capsule of what the industry used to be. Nope. His descriptions and analysis are still as fresh, for the most part, as they were in the late 90's. For my reading, the best section of that book isn't the dishing on the business, nor the cheeky anecdotes about the kinds of people that work in restaurants, nor even the evocative memory of that first oyster which altered his life forever. No, I left that book stunned by the essay "A Day In The Life."

Of everything ever written about this profession, let this essay last as the best. Like his shadow, the reader becomes attached to Bourdain as he guides them through a busy day in charge of a restaurant. Over the course of his narration, he turns out to be a plucky companion to spend an imaginary workday with. The kind of guy that might make a good host of a travel show someday. During this full day (which begins well before the opening of the restaur-



ant), he swells through the lunch and dinner rushes, laments in the downtime about the customers to come, does his paperwork in whatever space there is, yells at idiotic merchants trying to gouge him during one of the busiest hours his day, and clutches his aging knees every time he needs something from the basement. Things go wrong in this kitchen and they go wrong often. Bourdain will do his best to correct those errors in as swift a measure as he can but he knows every little setback ripples.

Yet through the errors and the pain and the heat, he leaves you with the sense that he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. That these conditions are what make him comfortable and he wants to be honest with you before you make any assumptions about his business (or, even worse, think of joining him on the line). He repeated that he wrote that book with his dishwasher in mind, hoping to write something that would make him laugh and feel like his story had been properly told. Herein predicated another aspect his success: his ability to exceed the expectations of his audience by being so understanding of who they are. "Kitchen

Confidential” could have been it for Bourdain and he would still be a legend to back-of-house staff everywhere. To his surprise, it was a hit and with it came opportunities outside of book-writing.

By this point in his life, Bourdain had hardly been anywhere. He had family in southwest France which provided him childhood vacations but, other than that, he hadn’t stepped much off the soil of New England. Beyond that, his offerings were a knowledge of food preparation as well as a voice people wanted to hear. He didn’t know how long this run would last so when he was offered a job in television, he took it thinking he might get to cut a few episodes and then be able to say he got to see the world on someone else’s dime.

While I watched occasional episodes of “A Cook’s Tour” and “No Reservations”, the show that floored me was “Parts Unknown.” I think I had a touch of bias against a show like this because of other shows that claimed to be like it. The sorts of shows with smiling, American hosts who treat the Indigenous cultures with the same unnatural friendliness as they would treat children. These hosts are happy but they aren’t warm. It doesn’t matter if their show is in Thailand, Ethiopia, or Portugal, the format is the star and the people, and by extension their culture, become a convenient set to impress viewers. Bourdain never did this.

Throughout the various cultures that populated his show, he was neither gawker nor coward. He didn’t think the answer to human life automatically lived in a foreign land because of the shortcomings of his own society, nor would he look into the camera and explain the important actions of the world as if he was talking about zoo animals. He let people live on his show and assumed, correctly, that the basis for their actions would make sense because they were human and they were being shown to humans. It doesn’t take an advanced degree or an extreme level of empathy to see a bunch of people sitting in a circle to eat to realize a certain sameness with oneself. Everybody eats and, remarkably, everybody eats the same. Had he gone in with any other part of human life as his subject (politics, history, art, etc.), I think the people would still have been seen as strangers — no matter how personable he was. By looking at the world as a cook, and by making food the central connective piece of it all, Bourdain shared something so obvious that it had been terribly overlooked.

According to my old university, I am a certified sociologist. As such I’ve been shown various means of studying people in groups. I can look at how much money they have, where they live, what others think of their skin colour, how they’ve been impacted by implementations of government policy — all viewpoints keen to categorize or mobilize. Never, across an entire degree of study, was I ever asked to consider the importance of food to individuals or to cultures. Instead I was shown garb, gods, and gaffes. Although, if they did, I never would have picked up on it. For most of my life I have been what might nicely be called a fussy eater (then again, as George Carlin correctly remarked, fussy eater is a euphemism for big pain in the ass). Was I aware why I didn’t want to eat most things? Not at all. It was an instinct that appeared at birth.

“I was getting it, I was getting him. Bourdain’s talent and freedom had come together in brilliant works of writing and television and I was hooked.”

This aversion for anything that might taste new eventually matured into seeing food as a flat unit. A necessity to remain alive and nothing more. Who cared about craft or taste or history — a calorie was a calorie. Perhaps that’s why Bourdain flew past me: his calling and my interests were too far diverged. At first, his show appealed only to the side of me that appreciated well-crafted descriptions of vistas and the kinds of conversations one wishes they had the skill in which to participate. But even when his shows languished in the marvels of the world or allowed the most ordinary of people to express themselves with ease, what was always sitting between them was something to eat. Was the welcoming he so often received done because of his innate charisma? I lean towards his willingness to accept a foreign meal with generosity, interest, and a secular kind of grace.

When we eat, it is the one time that our lives get the pause they deserve. In sleep,

our minds churn through images, anxieties, and ideas from our lives. While driving, we are constantly reflecting and reliving what we think and see in a day. But when we sit down to eat with other people, there is no other moment than the one hanging over the table. Consider this for a moment: if you think about when people fall in love, where was it? The movies? Maybe but it would be hard to fall in love without looking to listening to someone. During a sunset walk? Even if the night’s rising colours made the feeling more intense, they might have been too distracting away from the action of falling itself. No, in all likelihood, it was over a meal. That is where we know to the fullest extent of our heart that we feel love. It’s a gentle force that slips over people when they grant themselves the opportunity to sit and share for a while. Before food gets to the gut, it has to pass by the heart. In this way, the acceptance of food as a personal, cultural, and artistic creation is the most intimate connection a person can make to something new.

Through food, Bourdain penetrated the hearts of the world. With this revelation of the true purpose of great meals, I knew how I would have to have to alter my actions for the year. I started to do what I was born to do: study. My YouTube recommendations flooded with chefs both celebrity and not. When I went out to eat, I started to venture away from the known favourites and towards dishes that required a dash of adventure and consideration. Meal by meal, this fussy eater became a little more unpredictable and he was glad to be becoming so. Food as fuel is a boring way to eat and I think I should have known that. To purely survive, yes, food is something we require. But in looking at the meals of the world, there isn’t one place or one culture that doesn’t spice things up. If food was only meant to be fuel, no one would have invented seasoning.

At home, I started to experiment with how I prepared my meals. The way I held a knife changed and my willingness to try new meals skyrocketed. With the help of physical and digital cookbooks, as well as my wife who is much better versed in the culinary world than me, I was trying my hand at homemade shawarma, meatballs, Greek salads, and many other dishes that to most people are standard fare. They didn’t take long to prepare, nor to clean, and the reward of the labour was as satisfying as the conclusion to a great novel.

After a year of making the choice to be more dedicated in the kitchen, I can say that I'm better but I'm not yet good. I understand enough of the basics to teach them to a high school class and appear more capable than I actually am. But cooking has also faced me with bit of inadequacy. In studying food, I learned that I don't yet have a tasteful imagination. My mind has trouble conjuring what certain flavours will taste like before they're blended and does not yet store the solutions to dishes whose tastes are off. Being so unattached to food for so long, it should come as no surprise that I lacked refinement.



Still, it was strange to discover how personally I took my cooking. If a meal didn't turn out as hoped, the depth of disappointment was like something a teenager might deal with after a romantic rejection. Cooking good food is a skill that may seem to come to certain people instinctively but is always the result of the factors of life that make for meaning: discipline, repetition, creativity, and harmony. It's taken me a year to realize that I'm not a natural chef but neither was my imaginary mentor so at least we had that in common. By being so openly imperfect, he was what I needed as an example. The other chefs, the ones who compete and fling fire for crowds, they had no grip on me because they were so far beyond my capabilities. Bourdain was different not because he made me want to cook but because he showed me the value of food.

I was getting it, I was getting him. Bourdain's talent and freedom had come together in brilliant works of writing and television and I was hooked. As if his influence in the kitchen wasn't enough, I started watching his interviews and his speeches and across the years when he was on the topside of the microphone, he always had something new to say. There are many famous wordsmiths that I admire, people whose lives deal in thinking and then churning those thoughts for profit. What is so disappointing is finding a person like this and learning that they are an anecdote repeater. The kind of person who leans on the same quotations, the same references, and the same jokes. Who has mastered the ability to reiterate each story with the same inflections and gestures so as to seem as if it is the first time. I recognize them because I used to do the same thing as a server when I was near the end of my shift and didn't want to greet my next table with cheeriness because I was tired. So I learned the tune of happiness and followed it through the repeat interaction with my guest being none the wiser.

Bourdain was never like this. It didn't matter if he was on Letterman or some dinky podcast recorded with terrible audio — if you asked him a question, he gave a thoughtful and personalized answer. He was bold with his opinions and he seemed to always present them fully formed with plenty of examples. Perhaps miraculously, he was also able to be so informed, without coming off as particularly enlightened.

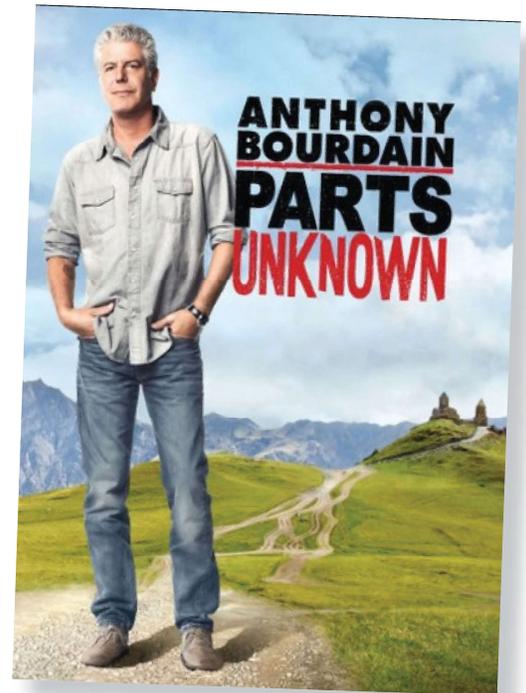
I'm sure anyone who's been around travellers has had to sit through some inane story about a cultural peculiarity that altered their vision of the world. The kind of tired revelation whose poor expression aids in making the experience insufferable. Anthony Bourdain could have been that guy, constantly blowing off the comfort of his home country to remind his viewers of all the better things he's seen before and how the wisdom of the world is always elsewhere. He could have taken over a conversation at a dinner table to tell the guests about how the same dish is done similarly but better somewhere else, thereby talking about neither bit of food but only himself. He was too smart for that, too snarky.

Whether in gold or gutters, Anthony Bourdain had an admirable capacity to fit in wherever he was. He mingled with exclusive chefs and dined in the sky as easily as he sat on the ground, cross-legged, holding a steamed fish that someone else

around the fire just hauled from the ocean. In any of these exchanges, he demonstrated an interest and a curiosity that let the other person talk rather than be the central figure of the segment. Yes, it was his show and he was asking the questions but these conversations were not vaulting pads for Tony to correct or try to otherwise simplify his guests. As they share their meals with him, he shares his show with them.

He liked to say that on his show he asked simple questions. Questions like "Are you happy?" and "What's for dinner?" but across his later work, a new question snuck in and tucked itself neatly near the end of the episode. After showing us a way of living that was becoming more familiar, he'd ask his guest if they believed that everything was going to turn out okay. From street chefs to the President of the United States, everyone he asked said yes. Even if they were in a personal bog at the moment, after sharing a meal with Anthony Bourdain, they agreed that things would get better in the future. It's a simple question but profound when and where he asked it.

His was a life that had been marred by terrible working conditions, unstoppable



addictions, and a voice in his head that would unexpectedly take over to counter everything he believed in. A voice that told him nothing was worth continuing. When he asked if things were going to be okay, he did so in a way that spoke to his insecurities and his aspirations. He could call himself smarmy all he wanted but he had full cre-

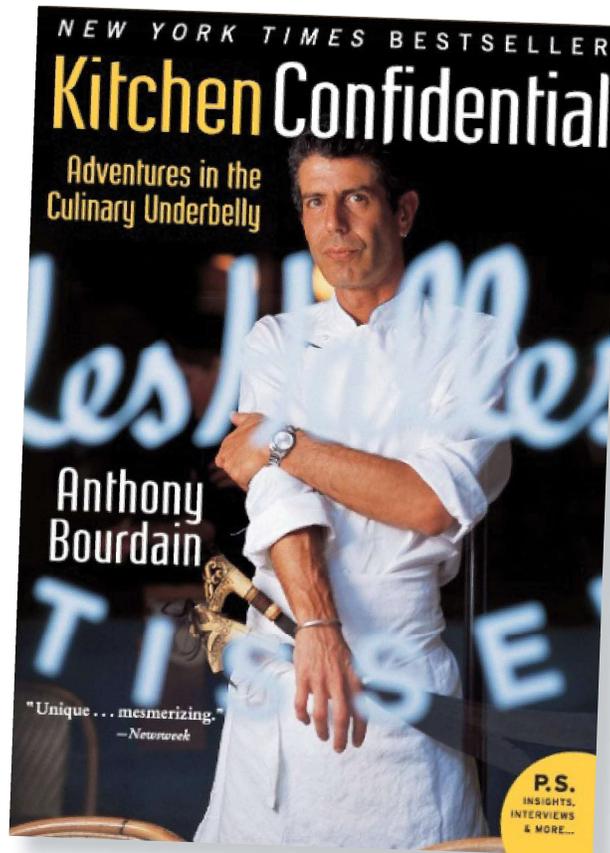
ative control of his shows. It was his choice to not only ask that question but include the continuously positive answers. Anthony Bourdain was a depressed optimist. Someone who walked through the dissonance of being told that things would improve and believing that they would never. It might be why his death, of all those who died famous, resonates with his particular majority.

The end of his story has been well publicized. In a luxury hotel room in France, while he was filming an episode of his show, and when he was alone, he hanged himself. It was weird to watch the show after his death because of how frequently he joked about dying by that exact means. I'm not sure I believe the theory that people only tell the truth through jokes but I do believe that jokes are ruined when they turn out to be true.

For all his writing, he didn't leave a note. The only words we have from the near-end of his life as a series of back and forth text messages written to his ex-wife. These messages both sound like him and don't. They convey the way his mind compartmentalized its needs like a chit-printer. Short, tight sentences without ambiguity. As they have been reported, there is an eerie quality to them because, as viewers of his shows know, he wasn't one to outwardly express himself in this way. He loved his ad-verbs, his adjectives, and his adverbs – they were the sauce and spices of his prose. To see him be curt, even in a medium as terse as texting, they sounded like they came from someplace else. A place alluded to but never actually shown for what it was.

With any good story, the ending must be reckoned with. The choices made and the impact left by the creator put the receiver in a state of having been changed and changed utterly. It was so hard to watch this vibrant individual only as a recording when he was always so near to the wild heart of life. With his death, misfortunate as it was, it provided his audience with perhaps his most difficult teaching. No matter how much we saw of his shows, read his work, or listened to his answers, we didn't know exactly what it was like to be in his head. Despite how open, casual, and articulate he was, there was still some unrelenting presence that shocked everyone when it engulfed him.

In this way, Bourdain reminds us that dipping into the life of another is not enough. That there is no substitute for living fully and that his exploits were not there so that we could live through him but so that we could venture off towards our own discoveries. We can learn and study and inform ourselves all day but until we actually go and live the thing as it is there will always be something missing, something we don't understand and don't expect. If I had watched him dine with the family in Hawaii and been content with what I saw, I would have failed the spirit of



the show. When the credits rolled and the final CNN logo flashed on-screen, I always left his show wanting to be like he was. Not an exact copy, that too would have been a failure, but similar enough to be original.

In a world without him, what are we to do to endure? As I carry myself on through my years, I'll know when I'm channeling what I've noticed from the life of Anthony Bourdain. When I recognize that openness is a tremendous virtue; when I learn enough about the world to ask simple questions; when I am proud to serve someone else; when I am equally ready to immediately denounce anyone who treats those who serve poorly; when I drink a Negroni; when

I accept someone on their terms; when I choose the new not for novelty's sake but for the experience; when I see where people unite; and when I recognize the times to be the lead in a conversation and when to be the listener

In reflecting on this year and across the good-heartedness brought about by Anthony Bourdain, I have my own attempt at a trend. While anyone can try to experiment with their life in the described way, what I will give at the end of this essay is for the people who are both well-versed in culinary arts and those who don't know the difference between a saucepan and a stockpot.

Call up someone you know but haven't seen in a while. Don't text them or email them – make sure you hear their voice – and invite them to a home-cooked meal by you in your home. Then I want you to really think about what you want to make, what you're capable of, and what they might like. Spend as much of your day buying, prepping, and cooking the food so that when your guest arrives you can be an attentive host. Ask them simple things and wait for their answers – this is not the night to lecture them about some new exercise regime you're trying or why you can't get along with your boss. Serve them a gracious portion and make sure there's something delicious to drink so you can clink glasses before dining. Be ravenous in eating and in conversation, reminisce without guilt or fear, and tell at least one joke the other person hasn't heard before. Leave the dishes for later and instead use the rest of the time

for more talk or a game. When the night feels over but not exhausted, walk them to the door and thank them for spending some time with you.

After all that, somewhere, in the invisible middle between the two of you, you'll see the place where love lives. You may not realize until after the dishes are done and your guest has left with a full belly and a tingling head but you'll know you've been to that place. It's beautiful when you're there with someone else and how you'll look forward to every future journey. Ironically, loneliness can be best starved by eating.

Thank you, Chef. □

Overheard

Dave Bachmann



Illustration: Lasvu / Adobe Stock

The coffee shop was small. It was not small because it had to be small but because the owner, in his desperation to accommodate as many customers as possible, had squeezed so many tables into it. They were arranged haphazardly, were much too close together and shared the common characteristic of needing a folded napkin to provide stability.

The old man wore spectacles, his gray hair crying out for a trim. The years had eroded his skin to a pasty, creased finish which seemed to crackle with each expression. While worn by age,

there was a clever dapperness about him, a gray-speckled beret perched at a slight angle, a bright blue scarf slung around his neck, just the hint of a thin-lined mustache. Across from him, a wisp of a woman, slight, somewhat stooped, bifocals resting precipitously on her nose, white hair looped in lazy curls about her eyes. It was the woman who was talking, animatedly, lightly pounding the table for emphasis.

“How to do it, Dan? That’s the immediate question and one you haven’t adequately addressed. Car running in the garage? That would work.”

A young woman sat at a table not more

than a foot from the old man and woman. Earbuds, laptop, an open textbook decried her college student status. She rocked gently to music unheard by anyone but herself, her bright red hair sweeping gently back and forth.

“Actually, I was thinking about leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge.”

One of the college student’s earbuds slipped slightly. The rocking stopped. Her hands hovered over the keyboard.

“Leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge. How romantic, Dan. Holding hands, I suppose.”

“You know me, Betty, I’m a sentimental, old fool.”

The college student stared straight ahead, eyes wide.

The old woman sighed. "I don't know, Dan. About the bridge, I mean. There are sharks in the bay."

The old man laughed. "You're kidding, right? Falling at 75 miles per hour for 220 feet. It's like hitting concrete."

"I know that," the old woman indignantly replied. "I was referring to the fact that the sharks will eat what's left. I think there should be something for the children to say goodbye to."

The old man considered this, scowling. "Yes, I suppose you're right. The car's the way to go."

"The 1970 Dodge Dart?"

"Of course. Belches exhaust like a locomotive on steroids. Garage fills up with carbon dioxide. Nighty night."

The college student glanced quickly at the couple. There was no clue, no indication of sickness, no overt signs of poverty, nothing that would explain what she was hearing while pretending not to hear.

The old man tenderly grasped the old woman's hand.

"There should be a note, don't you think?"

"I suppose, Dan. But what would it say? 'Sorry about missing Harry's soccer game this Saturday. Hope he scores a goal or two. Catch you on the flip side.'"

The old man chuckled. "God, I love your sense of humor, Betty. Ok, no note."

The college student shifted uneasily in her chair, trying to refocus on the unfinished assignment before her. It suddenly seemed so insignificant in the shadow of this thing, this terrible thing that was being unveiled next to her. Slowly, methodically, she gathered her things, having made a decision about what she was going to do, what she must do, and quickly made her way to the exit.

"When?" the old woman asked.

"In the next chapter. I suppose it'll be the last one," the old man reflected. "Not much more can happen once you've killed off the two protagonists."

"It just seems a little cliché-ish, Dan."

"I still like the idea of jumping off the Golden Gate. That's not a cliché."

"Yes, it is. People do it all the time."

"Not holding hands," the old man insisted.

Betty sighed, sipped her latte, then posed, "What if you didn't kill off your two main characters? Just have them leave town. Splitsville."

Outside, the college student was writing a note on a yellow pad. She was writing it to two old people she didn't know but with whom she had experienced a brief, one-sided, intimate relationship. She wrote slowly, deliberately, the words rising from a deep, vulnerable place inside her. Having finished it, she carefully folded the note and searched the parking lot for a 1970 Dodge Dart. It was parked in front, nearest the entrance to the coffee shop. As if handling something secret and delicate, she tucked it carefully under the windshield wiper. Pausing, she placed her hand on the note and whispered, "Please God, let this make a difference."

And with that, she was gone.

The old man and woman exited the coffee shop, their conversation spilling outside.

"Alright, Betty. I'll write it your way. They sell their house, their belongings and move to... I don't know, Florida?"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What's the matter, don't you like Florida? How about Arizona?"

"No," the old woman said, pointing toward the parking lot, "look."

"Well, I'll be," the old man cackled, "it's a Dodge Dart, I do believe!" He shuffled over to the car and peered inside.

"A 1970 Dodge Dart! I declare!"

"It's an omen, Dan. You're not supposed to kill them off."

"You're right, Betty. It's an omen for sure. Well, then, that settles it. They're off to Arizona."

Betty sighed, "You're just the king of clichés today, Dan. How about somewhere exotic... like Polynesia?"

Slowly, the two old people made their way to their car, a 2019 Subaru Outback, their back and forth banter continuing, like two prize fighters refusing to give up.

"Arizona."

"Polynesia. Arizona's boring."

"Ok, Florida."

"Too many old people."

The old man opened the door on the passenger side and the old woman nimbly slipped in. "Alright," the old man cried, "Polynesia!" and then, upon closing the door, mumbled in a low voice, "Arizona, it is."

And with that, they were gone.

A young woman, disheveled and thin, emerged from a nearby discount store, clutching a plastic bag. As she fumbled for her car keys, she dropped the bag, its contents spilling onto the pavement, revealing several over-the-counter containers of pain killers. Embarrassed, she scooped them up.

Her hands shook as she tried to unlock her car, a 1970 Dodge Dart. Once inside, she dumped the pain killers on the seat beside her, leaned back and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw the note.

At first, she was annoyed, assuming the paper on her window was an advertisement. But as she studied it further, she saw the frayed edges which suggested it had been torn from a tablet. Perhaps it was a note from someone who had backed into her car. Expecting the worse, she retrieved the note and read it.

I don't know you. But I do know you. I realize this probably doesn't make a lot of sense to you right now but I want you to know something. You matter. You matter to me, a stranger, you've never met. And you matter to all the people your life has touched and will be touched by you. I don't know what you've gone through or what you will go through. Some of it will be bad but a lot of it will be good, too. And one thing is for sure, the world will be worse off for your absence in it. Your joy, your laughter, your compassion are needed by those that love you today and will love you tomorrow.

Please stay. May God bless you.

The young woman stared at the note for a long time. And then, she read it again. And again. By the fourth time she had read it, the note was tear stained and the ink was beginning to run.

"How could anyone have known?" she said, trembling. "How could..."

And then, her phone rang. It was her mother.

"Honey, honey, is that you? We've been trying to call you for three days. Honey?"

"Yes, Mom. Sorry. I've been going through some stuff."

"We were so worried. Are you ok?"

The young woman looked at the painkillers, then back at the note. She took a deep breath and then, in a composed, steady voice replied, "Yes, Mom. I'm Ok. Everything is going to be fine." □

Fermentation

Adrianna Nine



“Let it sit for a minute. Let it catch some air.”

I tipped the glass of '22 cabernet away from my lips. My dad sat kitty-corner to me in a leather chair littered with tiny holes, the remnants of cat zoomies cut short. He swirled his own glass—stemless, IKEA—in one hand, while scrolling on his phone with the other. My boyfriend sat beside me on our mustard yellow sofa, clutching a glass with a half-inch of crimson at the bottom.

I swirled, sniffed, swirled again. I waited to see if the glow of an iPhone 12 on my father's face would blink, if he'd slide the device into the pocket of his jeans and turn toward me instead, the person he'd purportedly driven six hours to see. But the bluish light remained—changed tones,

even, as he swiped from one app to another—and I looked at my boyfriend instead. He smiled at me, but his toe was tapping the floor.

“I'm getting cherry,” I said, holding my glass just under my nose as I reached for after-work wine tastings of weeknights past. “Maybe a little bit of tree bark, after a light rain.”

My boyfriend raised his eyebrows and looked to his own glass for a hint of tree bark.

“Yup,” my dad said.

I was doing everything I could to give this wine what it deserved. Weeks earlier, I'd received a text from my dad containing three photos: a shriveling vine, a pallet of bruised grapes, my sister churning a wooden wine press with a smile on her face

and sweat on her brow. The two of them had driven to a family friend's vineyard in central California to enjoy a weekend of good old-fashioned winemaking, and my dad had returned home with a crate full of unlabelled bottles from previous years. Three of these had made their way to my townhome in Arizona. One had been uncorked just moments prior, my dad's “'22 cab” Sharpie scrawl rupturing with a twist of the corkscrew.

In a spurt of self-determination, I returned my glass to my lips and sipped. Thick crimson syrup washed over my tongue, and my vision of a damp, cherry-littered forest floor fell away. It was red wine. Still, it was the best I'd had in my life.

My boyfriend had sipped from his, too, and was doing everything he could not to

let his lips pucker against the tannins. My dad, I'd noticed, had slipped his phone into his pocket. He nodded slowly, swallowing his own swig.

After two hours, a couple trips to the bottle on the kitchen counter, and a drawn-out discussion of Sam Fox's \$308 million sell-out to the Cheesecake Factory, I plucked our empty glasses from the coffee table and brought them to the sink. Our conversation had begun to sputter, a fire running out of fuel to burn. I felt guilty leaving my boyfriend to fend for himself, but I was thirsty for the few seconds I could steal away for myself, away from my father's raised voice—"I'm not shouting, I'm just passionate"—and my boyfriend's placations.

I turned on the water, soaped up a sponge. And then, smooth as butter, the first glass slipped from my hands. It crashed against the granite bottom of the sink, bubbles indistinguishable from shards of glass.

"Are you okay?" my boyfriend called.

I checked my palms for wet red blossoms. In the absence of any, shame found permission to flood my body. I hadn't had that much to drink: a glass and a half, maybe. We'd munched on crackers and a wedge of cheese I'd sliced up last minute. I'd used this brand of soap before—

"Party foul," my dad chuckled as my boyfriend picked glass from the sink.

It was clear how long I'd been a beneficiary of Phoenix's warm weather. I'd come in from the Prescott Airbnb's frigid balcony just moments before, desperate for the kind of warmth even an impersonal, undecorated kitchen could provide. Now my pale fingers gripped the quartz countertop as I rode out the last of my shivers and watched my father choose from a trio of wines.

"We've got a 2014 cab franc, a 2017 cab sauv, and a 2021 cab sauv," he said, tilting the bottles back so he could study them under the lenses of his eyeglasses. The eyeglasses were new; it had taken me several minutes to notice them after we'd said hello and exchanged stiff hugs. The transition lenses had been on their way toward darkness, then, so I really had no excuse.

The bottles were yet another favor he'd received after a weekend at Barney's vineyard. Again, they were bare, and I didn't know what he was looking for. I had no attachment to any varietal, and only one year in particular stuck out to me.

"2014 was the year I graduated high school," I said. "Let's do that one."



He continued to twist and squint at the bottles.

I blinked.

"Let's do the '21 cab sauv," my dad said.

I pressed my lips together and pondered for the nth time in my 27 years of knowing him whether to ask if he cared about my opinion at all. In the end, it was my sister's presence that convinced me to keep my mouth shut; I had asked for the three of us to go on a short family vacation, after all, and it wouldn't be fair for me to rock the boat on the first night.

Instead I agreed, and he poured us glasses. My sister sipped from hers and made a face like she'd bitten into something sour.

I spent a half-minute or so squinting at the shelves of my pantry before flipping on the light. Between canned black beans, a greasy bottle of vegetable oil, and a half-eaten carton of Peeps sat the leftovers from the Airbnb: one bottle of 2014 cabernet franc, one of 2017 cabernet sauvignon.

It'd been months since Prescott, and the sun threatened to shrink the cherry tomatoes growing on my patio every spring afternoon. But the acronyms Sharpied into each cork remained, immortal in their short, blocky print. It was the all-caps scrawl of 27 birthday cards, two congratulatory graduation cards, and one college-ruled letter sent in a fit of fatherly emotion—all tucked carefully into the box of correspondence under my bed, where I rarely looked. Somewhere in that box, the same script spelled *You're the best daughter a dad could ask for* and *I'm so proud of the woman you've become*.

I heard a peal of laughter from the backyard. Downstairs, my friends waited with empty glasses and open laptops, dragging their feet toward the moment in which we'd all tuck into our manuscripts and make a concerted effort toward boosting our word counts. I'd promised red wine, and I'd deliver red wine; I was thirsty for it myself now, my saliva thick in anticipation of cabernet tannins. I just needed to decide which cork to rupture first.

I tasted copper and realized I'd been chewing the inside of my lip. Perfumed by cereal and dry cat food, the pantry was a capsule in which I could conceivably stall a decision like this one forever by entertaining it over and over, until every last ingredient on the shelves expired and the wine had gone sour. *Problem solved*.

A dove cooed outside, announcing the sun's descent behind Camelback.

Did the fact that the cab franc had been made the same year I'd turned 18 say anything about the hope it contained, the potential our relationship had? Or had it been too late for us by the time the grapes were pressed into barrels and seeped into oak? Did the cab sauv's relative newness say anything about a fresh start? Even if it did, would the opportunity for one ever come?

Someone switched on music downstairs.

I pulled both bottles from their shelf. There was room for options on my patio, where friends sang and mosquitos danced just outside of the citronella candle's flickering radius. I tucked one bottle into the crook of my elbow to free up a hand for a corkscrew. On the way down the stairs, I didn't look at the cork at all. □

Offline Anguish

Heimir Steinarsson

Good grief, I can't believe it.
This is an absolutely
horrendous situation:
The Internet is down.

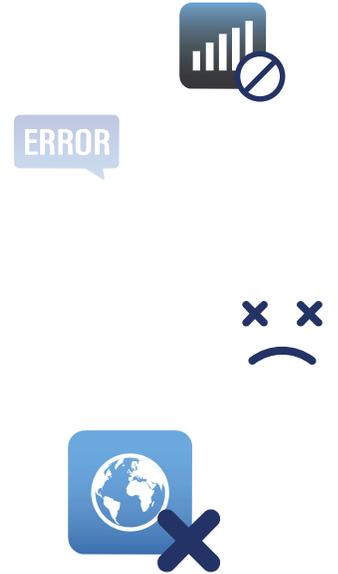
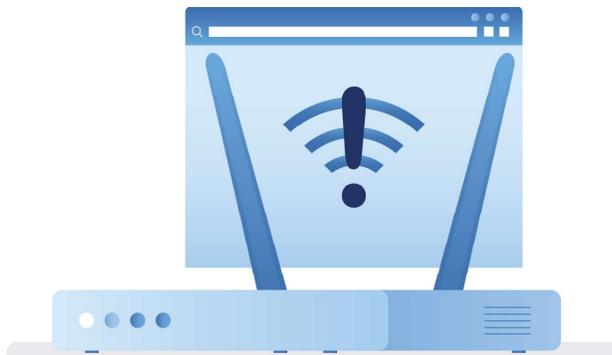
How could we let this happen,
and what are we to do now?
I'm trying to get help,
but there's nobody around.

Is really no one here who
can help us solve this matter?
My head is feeling light
and my mind is going numb.

If I am not connected,
I have no sense of self
and I feel as if I might just
as well be deaf and dumb.

It's been five minutes now
and I still have no connection.
Please get me back online,
or I think I'll go insane.

It's back! It's back! Thank goodness!
A sense of safety comes
over me, now that I'm linked to
the World Wide Web again.





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