

The MANTELPIECE

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Table of Contents

Editorial

Lillian Heimisdottir	4	The Psychology of Creativity
----------------------	---	------------------------------

Travel

Eugénie de Rosier	5	Çemberlitas Hamami
William Fleeson	18	Single Party State

Poetry

Michael Salcman	7	The Dogs Are Barking, The Caravan Moves On
Gloria D. Gonsalves	17	At The Last Boundary

Commentary

Erik N. Patel	8	Award Season
---------------	---	--------------

Food & Drink

Sonali Roy	10	Bengali Pithe-Puli
Bec Ehlers	22	In the Kitchen

Literature

Eleanor Jiménez	12	Seeing the World Through Books
-----------------	----	-----------------------------------

Essay

John Janelle Backman	13	Slow Zen Horse
Lillian Heimisdottir	16	The Fabric of Change

Fiction

Giselle DaMier	14	The Paris Planet
Linda Boroff	25	Freshman Folly

The Light Side

Heimir Steinarsson	27	Job Interview
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The Psychology of Creativity

Unveiling the Muse Within

Within the vast, intricate maze that constitutes the human psyche, creativity emerges not merely as a spark of innovation but as a radiant beacon, guiding the way for artists, writers, and thinkers alike. This force, subtle yet profoundly impactful, acts as a whisper from an invisible muse, a gentle nudge that not only fuels the creative fires of those engaged in the arts but also serves as a fundamental pillar essential to the human spirit. Creativity is a phenomenon wrapped in mystery, an elusive essence that transcends the mere act of producing works of art, literature, or melodious compositions. It represents a source of endless intrigue and marvel, imbuing the creative process with a depth and richness that elevates it beyond simple creation, transforming mere works into profound reflections of the human condition.

In this editorial, we embark on an ambitious journey to delve deep into the psychology of creativity, to navigate the uncharted territories of the mind that give birth to innovative ideas and groundbreaking concepts. We aim to dissect the intricate cognitive processes that form the backbone of creative thought, to wander through the vast emotional landscapes that accompany the tumultuous journey of creation, acknowledging the intense feelings of euphoria and despair that often accompany the creative process. Moreover, this exploration seeks to identify and understand the various environmental catalysts that play a pivotal role in either igniting the creative spark or, conversely, stifling its flame. Through a comprehensive examination of these elements, we endeavor to provide a more nuanced understanding of creativity, revealing the complex interplay between mind, emotion, and environment that shapes the essence of the creative experience and drives the evolution of artistic and intellectual expression.

At its core, creativity is the ability to generate ideas, solutions, or products that are both novel and valuable. Psychological research has long sought to unravel the mysteries of the creative mind, proposing theories that range from the involvement of specific brain regions to the interplay of thought processes that defy linear explanation. Creativity is not the domain of a single hemisphere of the brain but a symphony performed by the entire orchestra. It's a dance between the conscious and the unconscious, where the spontaneous generation of ideas occurs at the edges of our awareness, in a space where intuition and logic intertwine.

“As we stand on the brink of a future shaped by rapid technological advances and global challenges, the importance of creativity has never been more apparent.”

Emotion plays a pivotal role in the creative process. It's the fuel that powers the engine of innovation, with passion and perseverance acting as critical components of what psychologist Angela Duckworth calls “grit.” The emotional landscape of the creative individual is often marked by a high tolerance for ambiguity and a capacity to explore the depths of both joy and despair. It's this emotional agility that allows creators to draw upon their experiences, transforming them into art that resonates with authenticity and power.

Creativity does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by a myriad of external factors, from the serendipity of random encounters to the structured chaos of a work-

shop or studio. The environment in which one creates can either serve as a catalyst for innovation or a barrier to it. Creative blocks, often the bane of the creative individual's existence, can stem from various sources—be it psychological barriers, such as fear of failure, or external pressures, like the demand for commercial success. Overcoming these blocks often requires a return to the intrinsic motivations that drive the creative act: curiosity, play, and the sheer joy of creation.

Society plays a crucial role in nurturing creativity. From education systems that encourage exploration and risk-taking to cultural institutions that support the arts, fostering an environment where creativity can flourish is essential. It's about valuing the process over the product, the journey over the destination. Encouraging a culture of creativity begins with recognizing its inherent value, not only in the arts but in problem-solving, innovation, and adapting to an ever-changing world.

As we stand on the brink of a future shaped by rapid technological advances and global challenges, the importance of creativity has never been more apparent. It's the key to innovation in science and technology, to cultural understanding and social change. The psychology of creativity offers a lens through which we can understand the complexities of the human mind, but it also serves as a reminder of our collective potential to imagine, create, and transform the world around us.

In exploring the psychology of creativity, we embark on a journey into the depths of the human spirit, a journey that reveals not only the mysteries of the creative process but the boundless possibilities of the human imagination. As we continue to unveil the muse within, we unlock the doors to a future where creativity knows no bounds. *L.H.* □

Çemberlitas Hamami

An Ancient Luxury, the Turkish Baths

Eugénie de Rosier



Our guide in Istanbul asked if he should get tickets to a Turkish bath so we could experience the ancient social ritual of *hamam*. The idea enticed with as little as its name, “Yes.” I said, recalling how my mother used to say, she felt in such a bath during the humid Minnesota Julys of my childhood. Now, decades later, I’d eased my body into the hallowed tradition, rooted in Ottoman and Islamic culture, where it had started.

The bath, *Çemberlitas Hamami*, was located within a famous mosque that had been built in 1584. What a salubrious way to celebrate life, as women here had done for centuries—cleansing their bodies, lifting their spirits, conversing with friends. No responsibilities.

We, four, extended family, had arrived separately in Istanbul and met at our rented apartment. In our 20s, 30s and a decade older, we were all attracted to the idea of a Turkish bath. Entering the historic complex, we accepted a palm-sized transparent bag, shot through with silver threads, that held a rough cleansing glove or *kese*; disposable black briefs; and a *peştamal*, a light-weight, filmy tea towel-sized wrap.

Motioned through a narrow hallway and beyond a thick wooden door, I felt the overstimulation of Istanbul ease with every step. A city of 15 million people situated at the crossroad between Europe and Asia, Istanbul is an amalgam of these, blended with the pull of its fertile and

ancient perspectives. We felt welcomed but sometimes needed respite.

Here, calm reigned as we entered the bath’s expansive interior courtyard, soaring beyond wooden balconies of a second and third floor to a rounded dome. The first floor held lounging chairs and divans and tables at which to sip an iced drink or Turkish tea before or after bathing.

This was the women’s bath, separate from the men’s. It was quiet. Those who spoke did so in a low hum. Each bather seemed in her own realm of rejuvenation, something my mother was all for in life. Whether diving into a lake, floating on the dead Sea, ferrying to the Aran Islands, or bathing an infant in a summer cabin’s sink, water charmed her.



An attendant directed us up a graceful staircase to a disrobing area. Passing through its glass door, we found a narrow-aisled locker room, where we hung our clothes in slim cupboards, and then donned the briefs and wrapped the delicate cloth under our arms. With keys and scrub gloves in hand, we slid into rubber sandals and descended. Another assistant led us toward one of many marble arches that graced the first floor's periphery, and through a massive wooden door to the hot room, the *sıcaklık*.

The magnificent space effused antiquity, and its heat enveloped me like a second skin. I entered with the wonder of the child I'd once been—enchanted to be in this Turkish bath my mother had only imagined. Hundreds of small circular openings in the domed ceiling tunneled daylight into the room and centered it over the vast marble platform, the *göbek taşı* or the navel stone. It was heated through the floor by wood furnaces.

The marble stone rose to thigh height and supported three prone women as we approached. It looked as if it could hold eight or nine recumbent bodies at once. The *göbek taşı*'s backdrop drew my eyes around the welcoming room. A score of graceful archways circled it with marble basins, *kurna*, between arches, and behind them half-circle private cubicles.

Following the lead of the supine women, we removed our wraps, splayed them on the platform's smoothness, and lay face up. No one spoke. My body loosened. The sultry air started to melt tensions, transude sweat, release toxins, and ready my body for the scrub. The multitudes of women who had reclined in this same spot on this navel stone crossed my mind as I succumbed to near unconsciousness with falling lids.

The scrubber—*kesciler*—arrived with a nudge to my leg. What time was it? Opening my eyes, I saw a burly woman with short red hair, probably in her fifties, dressed in a black cummerbund-like top and mid-thigh length black shorts—nonsense attire for the heat and the wet of a scrubbing.

“Turn.”

I rolled to my stomach, limp, and grasped that her terse directives were her usual conversation with a bather.

She threw a generous silver bowl of warm water on me and took my abrasive *kese* and started a scraping massage, sloughing off dead skin and the soil that adheres with travel. Her rub was strong and firm, so the massage was marked by considerable turbulence. But I didn't quite feel flayed, and never directed her—by yelping—to ease up. Her undivided attention felt expert and sumptuous. My mind floated, as if outside my body, and the roll and give of

muscle, bone, and tissue surrendered to any directive from her hands.

My mother would have relished all this personal care. She appreciated and made frequent use of maven, who were available to freshen and beautify hair, nails, face, body—and through those restore the soul.

“Turn.”

Again, water drenched me, and she excoriated my front and continued down my left leg. When she released the limb, it was so slack that I had to haul it in with my hand.

Then came the bubbles. What delight. Lying on my back, they fell on me in dense mounds of foam burying my body in their luxury. As weightless as a whisper, the lather adhered and worked its magic by softening my skin. So taken by the lush globules, I sighed with pleasure. How did she make this lavish show? I'd noticed, by the absence of her touch, that she'd left me briefly after the scrub. When she returned, the bubbles descended. My masseuse began kneading me with a rhythm that felt enhanced by the slip of the oil and soap. Any remaining kinks and knots responded to her pressure.

“Turn.”

A mass of bubbles fell on my backside. She pressed down, working on me another five minutes. Could the women of old have had such a comfort as these billowing suds? I hoped so.

Another masseuse stood at a marble basin near my niece, Alex, a brief distance from the slab. Slipping a bar of olive oil soap into a fine woven Turkish cotton bag the size of a pillowcase, she submerged it into the water, stimulating the production of bubbles. She pulled the bag from the water, removed the bar, and shook the pouch delicately to let the air do the work of making more bubbles. Returning to Alex, the masseuse held the sack's sewn end near her shoulder. With her other hand, she squeezed, aiming the suds along Alex's body. A thick stream of bubbles floated down to reach her.

To know that women came here to be rejuvenated, to recognize the similarity of my hamam compared to the women who'd bathed in the 16th century, turned my mind to how alike we are in St. Paul and in

The Dogs Are Barking, The Caravan Moves On

—Arab saying as quoted by Proust

Michael Salcman

The people are skipping meals as they endure shortages,
Lining up for hours to get fuel.
Without enough oil-based fertilizer
Farmers stop planting in their fields.

The government owes billions of dollars
And can't make payment on the interest of its loans.
The country hurtles towards bankruptcy with barely any money
For importing milk, cooking gas or toilet paper;
Mothers run out of infant formula and tampons.

Tourism has declined because of the pandemic
And concerns about safety since terror attacks in the cities
A few years ago.
Now the currency has collapsed by eighty percent
Making imports more expensive and worsening inflation.
Food costs have gone up by fifty-seven percent.

This is not what Adam Smith had in mind;
As in previous experiments, grocery shelves grow bare
And political corruption steals the wealth of the country.

Does any of this sound familiar to you?
It's a model of collapse
In the debt-laden economy of an island nation,
Coming soon to a theater near you.
The dogs are barking in Sri Lanka and the caravan moves on.

Istanbul. We all appreciated feeling refreshed, energized, and perhaps, being made young again, if only within the sacred marble interior of that bath.

My masseuse told me to sit so she could access my neck, shoulders, and arms. I twisted my body and dropped my legs to face her, flaccid, and said, "This is wonderful."

Her reserve broke. She smiled.

That finished, bowls of warm water sluiced over me and the lather slid away. She directed me to the half circle of privacy wall with an attached seat, everything carved from marble. I sat on a low step at a 90-degree angle, left of the sink, and glimpsed my daughter, Rachel, descending the navel stone for her shampoo.

Behind and above me, my keseciler pulled my back against her knees, doused my head, and lathered my hair. Two or three rinses from the deep bowls finished the shampoo. As my scrub came to an end, she gestured me farther beyond the hot room.

Languid and draping the peştamal across my breasts, I strolled in that direction. The smooth planes of my arms felt like satin as I entered a room with a pool.

My sister, Randy, and Alex slouched against the wall on a marble bench. Into the water I slipped, enveloped by warmth, stroking its considerable length back and forth. We had the pool to ourselves, as Randy joined me. Socializing is part of the bathing tradition, and the hamam remains a public meeting place. We murmured and laughed, feeling pampered and pristine. Did I hear the sighs of ancient women reverberating from the walls or was it a prescience of those who would come?

We baked awhile in no rush to end this invigorating feast. Then sauntered to the cool room and lounged, drinking a cold beverage. Clothed again, we returned to the hot room's door and asked for our masseuses by their number and tipped each. Generosity spurred me for this luxurious time under the care of someone so accomplished.

Despite the glory of this ancient building and the fragrant soaps and fine towels in its gift shop, this hamam was a no-frills affair. My mother, expert diver, water enthusiast, hadn't been in a Turkish bath, but would have enjoyed this relaxation—the abbreviated time of restoration to a new vigor, the momentary returning to bodily youth, the recovered outlook. □

Award Season

The Grand Tour of Self-Adulation

Erik N. Patel



Photo: Peopleimages / Adobe Stock

As the cold grasp of winter envelops the globe, the planet's myriad film industries kindle the fires of self-celebration, setting off on an opulent odyssey that meanders from the champagne-fueled revelries of the Golden Globes to the distinguished elegance of the BAFTAs, making essential detours to honor the craft at the SAG Awards, before reaching its zenith in the dazzling spectacle of the Oscars. This venerable journey, etched into the annual calendar, transcends mere acknowledgment of cinematic prowess, rising to the stature of an elaborate ritual in the sacred art of self-adulation. Each ceremony, with escalating grandeur, vies to eclipse its predecessors in splendor, theatricality, and the unbridled extravagance of its decor, setting stages that seem to whisper of legends, triumphs, and the timeless allure of the silver screen.

This grand parade of glitter and gold is not merely a sequence of events but a carefully choreographed dance of the stars, where the air is thick with anticipation and the nights are alight with the glow of gilded statuettes. It's a spectacle where the rich tapestry

of global cinema unfolds, showcasing a kaleidoscope of storytelling that transcends language and culture. With each stop on this illustrious circuit, the film community not only pays homage to the year's standout achievements but also partakes in a storied tradition of mutual admiration, where accolades are bestowed amidst a carnival of couture gowns, flashing cameras, and speeches that oscillate between heartfelt sincerity and rehearsed eloquence.

As this annual pilgrimage wends its way through the calendar, it becomes more than a celebration; it evolves into a grandiose display of the industry's capacity for reflection, recognition, and, occasionally, introspection. The path from the Golden Globes to the Oscars becomes a mirror reflecting the shifting landscapes of cinema, the emerging voices and the fading echoes of eras past, all the while draped in the opulence of black-tie galas and the whispered secrets of after-parties. Each award ceremony, striving to outshine the last, turns into a tableau vivant of cinema's enduring enchantment, festooned with floral

masterpieces that defy the imagination and settings that transport attendees and viewers alike to realms of sheer fantastical opulence.

Thus, as the world spins through the dark of winter, the luminaries of the film industry embark on this glittering caravan, a testament to their unyielding devotion to the craft of storytelling. It is here, among the sparkle and spectacle, that they find their annual moment of unity, a harmonious symphony of accolades and applause, celebrating not just the stories told but the indomitable spirit of those who tell them. This journey, rich in tradition and spectacle, reaffirms the magic of cinema, its power to inspire, to evoke, to transform, and to immortalize the fleeting moments of human experience in the amber of celluloid and digital memory.

The Golden Globes: Where Drinks and Deals Flow

The award season ignites with the shimmering spectacle of the Golden Globes, an event whose reputation extends far beyond the gleam of its statuettes, celebrated primarily for its legendary open bar that sets a particularly jovial and spirited tone for the ensuing gala. This illustrious night marks the convergence of the film and television industries, artfully erasing the distinctions between the grand narratives of cinema and the episodic tales of serial television, blending art with commerce in a dazzling display of glamour and ambition. Amidst this glittering backdrop, industry professionals engage in what might be considered the Olympic Games of networking: a marathon of schmoozing, where deals are whispered between sips of champagne and careers are made with the exchange of business cards under the soft glow of chandelier lights.

The Golden Globes stand out for their notably democratic approach to celebrating achievements across a broad spectrum of genres and formats, ensuring a diversity of accolades that is as wide-ranging as the attendees themselves. With categories sprawling across drama and comedy, film

and television, the awards offer a platform where the lines between highbrow art and popular entertainment blur, creating an inclusive atmosphere where almost everyone can bask in the light of recognition—or, at the very least, depart with the warm buzz of spirits, which in the convivial economy of the Globes, is tantamount to an accolade in its own right.

As the evening unfolds, the Globes transform into a microcosm of the industry's aspirations and dreams, a place where laughter mingles with earnest hopes and the clinking of glasses serves as a soundtrack to ambitions being kindled. The open bar, often the highlight for many, fosters an ambiance of camaraderie and celebration, where actors, directors, producers, and writers can momentarily set aside the competitive fervor that defines their profession, finding common ground over vintage wines and artisan cocktails. It's a unique alchemy of festivity and ambition, where the thrill of potential victory looms as large as the next round of drinks, and the air is thick with the promise of newfound alliances and friendships.

Moreover, the Globes are not just a precursor to the more formal ceremonies that follow; they are a standalone celebration of the eclectic and the eccentric, a testament to the vibrancy and diversity of storytelling that spans the globe. They encapsulate the spirit of an industry that thrives on innovation and connections, highlighting not just the stars on the screen but the myriad talents that bring these visions to life. In this way, the Golden Globes serve as both a harbinger and a celebration of the cinematic and televisual arts, setting the stage for a season of accolades with a night that honors the twin pillars of artistic achievement and the sheer, unabashed joy of a good party.

The BAFTAs: A Touch of British Reserve

Venturing across the Atlantic, the British Academy Film Awards, or BAFTAs, introduce a distinctly British flavor to the awards season tapestry, steeping the festivities in a brew of formal decorum and understated elegance. Here, thespians and filmmakers alike fine-tune their expressions of humble gratitude and rehearse speeches that must navigate the tightrope of modesty, embodying the quintessential British virtue of restraint. This ceremony is a showcase of cultivated tastes and discernment, lauding cinematic works that boast depth and artistry, the kind of films that audiences vow to queue up, yet, curiously, remain on the "must-watch" list indefinitely.

The BAFTAs stand as a bastion of refined celebration, an evening where the

effervescence of the champagne competes only with the sharp wit of the hosts, who deliver jokes as dry as the martinis. In this world of polished shoes and tailored suits, the merest fashion faux pas, such as a misaligned bow tie or a less than perfect crease, can ignite whispered controversies among the elite, rippling through the crowd with the subtlety of a well-aimed barb.

In this distinguished gathering, the glitter of celebrity is tempered by a collective reverence for the craft, where the true stars of the evening are the stories themselves, each vying for a place in the annals of cinematic greatness. The BAFTAs, with their unique blend of celebration and solemnity, remind us that film is both an art and a testament to the storytelling prowess that has long been a hallmark of British culture. Here, in the glow of the spotlight, the industry comes together not just to revel in the achievements of the past year but to uphold a tradition of artistic excellence that promises to inspire future generations of filmmakers and audiences alike.

The SAG Awards: Actors Honoring Actors

Following the glitzy trail of the awards season, the Screen Actors Guild Awards (SAG Awards) emerge as the cinematic landscape's own version of a high school popularity contest, albeit infused with the glamor and polish only Hollywood could muster. In this unique celebration, actors take the reins, casting votes in favor of their peers, thus turning the event into a glittering testament to camaraderie and competition alike. The range of performances honored here spans the emotional spectrum, from those that tug at the heartstrings with their depth and nuance to others that might leave viewers scratching their heads, muttering, "Perhaps it was a 'you had to be there' moment."

The SAG Awards stand out for their vibrant mix of earnestness and spontaneity, where acceptance speeches often veer into deeply personal territory, revealing the trials and triumphs behind the performances. It's an evening where the polished veneer of the silver screen gives way to genuine emotion and vulnerability, with winners sometimes catching even themselves off guard with their victories, embodying the unpredictable nature of the industry.

Moreover, the SAG Awards serve as a poignant reminder of the networks and relationships that pulsate beneath the surface of Hollywood's shimmering facade. Here, the adage "it's not just what you know, but who you know" is on full display, underscored by the reality that in the tightly knit community of actors, recognition by

one's peers can be the ultimate accolade. It's an environment where the bonds formed on set can translate into a rallying cry of support come awards season, highlighting the importance of visibility and connections in an industry as sprawling yet insular as Hollywood.

As the evening unfolds, the SAG Awards illuminate the intricate dance of recognition and rivalry that defines the acting community, celebrating not only the triumphs visible on screen but the enduring spirit of those who bring life to the characters we cherish. It's a night that reaffirms the value of peer acknowledgment in an industry where the spotlight often shines on the few, reminding everyone that behind each memorable performance is a network of relationships, mentorships, and friendships that sustain the creative soul of cinema.

The Oscars: The Grand Finale

Finally, the grand tour concludes with the Oscars, the Super Bowl of award season, where careers are made, dreams are fulfilled, or crushed, all under the watchful eyes of a global audience. The Oscars spare no expense, from the red carpet, which consumes more fabric than a small country's textile industry, to the "In Memoriam" segment, which inevitably forgets someone crucial, sparking outrage and remembrance tweets.

Each ceremony leading up to the Oscars serves as both a prelude and a pressure cooker, building anticipation and speculation. "Who will win?" "Who should win?" "Who wore it best?" These questions dominate conversations, overshadowing even the most pressing global issues, because if there's one thing more important than world peace, it's who takes home a golden statuette.

The Oscars night itself is a spectacle of epic proportions, featuring musical numbers that range from the sublime to the "what were they thinking?" and acceptance speeches that veer from the tearfully thankful to the politically charged. It's a night where Hollywood's biggest stars gather to celebrate the magic of movies, patting each other on the back with one hand while tweeting their own accolades with the other.

As the final award is handed out and the champagne loses its fizz, the grand tour of self-adulation draws to a close. The winners bask in their glory, the losers plot their comeback, and the rest of us wonder why we can't look away. It's a journey through the highs and lows of cinematic celebration, a reminder that in the world of film, the show must go on, especially if it ends with a standing ovation. □

Bengali Pithe-Puli

Celebrating Nature with Poush Sankranti

Sonali Roy



Photo: suparna / Adobe Stock

Bengali Pithe-Puli: Delicious rice flour dumplings served with date palm jaggery during Indian festival of Makar Sankranti.

According to Indian Astrology, the sun stays in each zodiac sign for 30 days; there are 12 zodiac signs. Thus, you also get the entire 360 degrees of the earth's movement. Actually, the earth moves, and the sun faces the zodiac signs one after another. That is called the sun's transit. That said, there are 12 months and 12 transits of the sun. 'Sankranti', the day of the transit, or the last day of each Bengali month, is also ideal for worshipping the Sun God. Poush Parbon, or the festival of Poush (Bengali month falling in the months December-January), is also known as Poush Sankranti or Makar Sankranti. 'Makar' in Sanskrit means Capricorn. The sun takes position in the zodiac sign of Capricorn on the day. That's why it's called 'Makar Sankranti'. This

transit is also indicative of vibrating positive energy. Celebrated on either the 14th or 15th of January each year, the festival marks the end of winter and the onset of spring as well, thus leading to the journey towards summer. This year, it was celebrated on January 15.

Offering sweets made of sesame seeds and jaggery to the sun on this day is a ritual considered auspicious. After dedicating to the god, the devotees take these as 'Prasada' or the life force as blessings of the god. It is believed that consuming sesame seeds mixed with jaggery helps adjust body temperature and boosts immunity, keeping in line with nature's touch-up of this seasonal break.

Hence, apart from the traditional and cultural bent, the festival is significant regarding ecology and the environment.

Every festival is significant for its ecological and environmental aspects

These are the ecological & environmental angles that largely impact our culture and celebration. A festival is not only a celebration, fun, or ritual but symbolic of art—cuisines, clothing, crafts, and so on. Rice used to be harvested three times a year in rural Bengal with the names of Aaush, Aaman, and Boro. But there were six seasons: Summer, rains, early autumn, late autumn, winter, and spring though presently there are three as dominating including summer, rains, and winter. Due to climate change & global warming, people have almost lost the charms of autumn and spring. So, as far as the earlier time frame is concerned, people used to stock crops and grains. Moreover, it

was very tough for the then people to cope with the agricultural issues due to natural calamities like droughts, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes.

Today, global warming is a growing threat to the entire world. It affects the agricultural industry, too. Climate change hampers the production of crops to a great extent. In the scenario of a high quantity of greenhouse gas emission, the production growth may decline, thus disrupting food availability, reducing access to food, and the quality of food may get worse. This can lead to insecurity of food in the future by lessening food production, which may cause inflation. As new research suggests, the number of microbes living in tropical soils can be affected due to global warming. This could be a challenge for the biodiversity of rainforests, thus increasing carbon emissions.

The festival of Poush Sankranti is immensely significant, especially in rural Bengal (India), where the first grains of the year are stocked up and Nabanna (Naba means new and anna means rice) is celebrated. New rice and new jaggery made of date palm add to the charm of the festival. New sunned rice is soaked in water. After that, it's mixed with slices of seasonal fruits and jaggery. Trust me, this uncooked dish tastes great! It's healthy too with its nutritious values.

Pithes or cakes are made of the new rice in various forms & shapes like Bhaja Pithe (fried cakes), Seddho Pithe (boiled cakes), Patishapta (rolled cakes), Rash Pithe (cakes made of red potatoes soaked in juice made of date palm jaggery), and so on. Another aspect of the Poush Sankranti is worshipping Tusu, which is widely celebrated in rural Bengal. Tusu is believed to be the Goddess of crops, grains, and harvests. Some believe she is equal to Goddess Laxmi; she blesses with wealth, prosperity, and peace. On the Makar Sankranti, people worship Tusu by offering her various crops & grains, homemade sweets, new clothes, colorful flowers, seasonal fruits, incense sticks, and lamps. Devotees also sing songs for her. And there are many folk songs centering around the theme of Tusu Puja. Finally, the idol is immersed in water. Similarly, people in rural Bengal also worship Bhaadu during Bhaadra—the Bengali month running from mid-August to September 17.

Poush Parbon significantly flavors the Indian kitchen, especially sweets. Traditionally, the practice was very popular among our ancestors, although it has now become less important, probably as people are busy and less conscious of maintaining their culture. At the same time, they are prone to achieving the maximum within the

minimum of time. This motto may not always be attainable, especially for preparing such delicious dishes, which are time-consuming and full of effort but free from any artificial flavor; those are the assets of homemade recipes and traditional Bengali kitchens.

The formulas and stories related to it have been passed on from generation to generation, although there are now many restaurants concentrating on seasonal dishes to attract customers. But the real taste lies when you try something with your own hands. The different shapes of the cakes really require much effort & practice. And after deliberate efforts, you can present the cakes in their ideal shapes, which is definitely an art. Trust me, I'm still unable to shape the cakes in spite of my several efforts. I feel nostalgic while participating in the festival. I still recall my grandmother (who passed away ten years ago) shaping the cakes and preparing other sweet dishes during the Poush Parbon. Presently, my mother gets the cakes ready for all of us, although we also help her in doing so. The fascinating smell of new rice and date palm juice is enough to indicate that now is the time to celebrate Poush Parbon.

Actually, pithe-puli is an age-old, traditional sweet dish (about 200-300 years old) passed on to the Bengalis from generation to generation, though the ingredients and methods have changed a lot. Unfortunately, there is no written history of the dish—only the taste, ingredients, and methods to survive. As I've heard from my grandmom, the dish was a must during the winter in Bengal in India, and she heard this from her ancestors. The people of Bengal are very much fond of sweet dishes and desserts. But, you know it was not possible to prepare sweet dishes for modern times at that time. But, as stated earlier, people of Bengal are always fond of sweets; there was a trend of arranging for homemade sweet dishes for family members and guests, especially during the winter because the weather is favorable in the season, and various fruits, veggies, and grains and rice flavor the charm of winter.

Jaggery, or 'gurrh' in Bengali, is extracted from date palm juice and mixed up and heated. It takes much longer to prepare the jaggery. After that, the hard shape comes out; it's full of dietary fiber, which is helpful for curing various diseases and fueling up the immune system. Jaggery is the main attraction of the Pithe-puli festival. Different types of cakes (made out of newly harvested rice) in different shapes are prepared (like steamed cake, fried cake, cake soaked in milk, etc.) during this winter festival.

Cakes are served with fragrant jaggery, which is available in both liquid and hard forms. Jaggery made out of date palm juice is

the most popular, although jaggery comes out of other fruit juices like palm, sugarcane, etc. Another flavor of pithe-puli is a cake made of sweet red potatoes, semolina, and jaggery. Boiled sweet red potatoes are mixed up well with semolina. The quantity of semolina should be a little equivalent to the potatoes; they should be smashed. After that, you can see the pasted look. Next, small circular balls are made with that. The balls are fried and soaked in the liquid of jaggery and cardamom juice, which takes around 30 minutes to prepare, though quantity matters much. Earlier, manual effort or fingering was a very important factor while shaping a pithe-puli.

But nowadays, various tools with various designs are available in the market to shape & design the pithe-puli or cakes. Another traditional dish adding to the charm of this festival is 'Saruchakli'. Needless to say, I like this dish very much! The ingredients are as follows: fresh black lentils, pasted rice, ginger paste, green chili, salt as to your taste, and water. You need to prepare the batter by mixing up all the ingredients. First, put the pan (usually the pan used for baking bread or roti is used for making Saruchakli) on the oven or induction cook-top (earlier villagers used stems of trees and coals as fuels). Put a small quantity of cooking oil on the pan and spread it over.

After that, pour some quantity of the batter with a ladle or scoop and spread the batter over the pan with the flat portion of the ladle— it'd take a circular shape. Pour a small quantity of cooking oil all over the edge of the batter spread-sheet. Now, fry upside down. Serve it hot with the jaggery made of the extract of date palm. It'd really taste delicious. It's healthy, too, as it takes a small quantity of oil to prepare. Pithe-puli still nourishes the kitchen of Bengal. The smell of jaggery and newly harvested rice creates a fascinating atmosphere. Really, time passes by; the calendar has witnessed so many ups & downs, but the charm of the-puli remains the same. Pithe-pulis are the pride of Bengal.

With pithe-puli, feel the then grand-moms of Bengal—they are no more in this mortal world but would exist with their favorite recipes they created with much passion and artistic hands. The kitchen was their laboratory, where they used to brainstorm various dishes with much hardship. I often heard my grandmom uttering thus, "We also enjoyed difficulties. When you achieve something through much crisis and hurdles, there is pure joy—it knows no bounds and goes beyond time."

Silence speaks a thousand words. And history is trendy here! Moreover, what is made at home with much passion and art is always welcome to all the parts of the world. □

Seeing the World Through Books

A Journey Beyond Borders

Eleanor Jiménez



Illustration: VectorMine / Adobe Stock

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements and the omnipresence of digital media, books remain timeless portals into worlds both known and unknown, offering readers the unique opportunity to explore the globe from the comfort of their own homes. The theme “Seeing the World Through Books” encapsulates the transformative power of literature to broaden horizons, deepen empathy, and bridge cultural divides. This article delves into how books serve as windows into diverse cultures, historical periods, and philosophical ideas, allowing us to

traverse the vast expanse of human experience without ever stepping foot outside our doors.

Books are unparalleled in their ability to transport readers across continents, immersing them in the intricacies of places they may never visit. Through vivid descriptions, nuanced storytelling, and deep character development, authors craft immersive worlds that allow readers to experience the sights, sounds, and flavors of distant lands. For instance, reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “Americanah” offers insights into the complexities of Nige-

rian culture and the immigrant experience in America, while Yann Martel’s “Life of Pi” provides a fantastical journey across the Pacific Ocean, exploring themes of survival, faith, and human resilience.

Historical fiction and non-fiction alike open gateways to bygone eras, enabling readers to witness the evolution of societies, the rise and fall of empires, and the individuals who shaped history. Hilary Mantel’s “Wolf Hall” series brings the Tudor court to life, offering a window into the political machinations and personal dynamics of Henry VIII’s England. Similarly, Yuval Noah Harari’s “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind” traverses thousands of years of human history, exploring how Homo sapiens came to dominate the Earth. These journeys through time not only educate but also provide context for the contemporary world, highlighting the interconnectedness of history and present-day society.

Books transcend the mere act of geographical discovery or historical chronicle, positioning themselves as unmatched instruments that probe the extensive and intricate terrains of human sentiment and cognition. They serve as gateways, welcoming readers into a rich mosaic of philosophical thought, ethical conundrums, and the profound depths of existential contemplation. This literary journey fosters an enriched comprehension of the multifaceted nature of the human condition. Engaging with the introspective storytelling of Virginia Woolf, readers are invited into the labyrinth of the mind’s inner workings, exploring the nuanced layers of personal identity and perception. Similarly, the existential

Slow Zen Horse

John Janelle Backman

reflections penned by Albert Camus offer a stark landscape in which to ponder the absurdities and existential dilemmas facing humanity.

These literary explorations are not mere academic exercises; they are vibrant, lived experiences that resonate deeply with readers, prompting them to confront their own beliefs and biases. As such, literature becomes a powerful medium through which complex ideas and emotions are not only encountered but deeply felt, encouraging a profound empathy and a broadened understanding towards the myriad perspectives that exist beyond one’s own lived reality. This expansion of empathy and intellect through the pages of books is a testament to the transformative power of reading, highlighting its role not just as a form of entertainment, but as a vital contributor to the ongoing dialogue about what it means to be human in a constantly evolving world.

Perhaps the most profound impact of seeing the world through books is the development of a global perspective and a deep sense of empathy for people from all walks of life. Literature has the unique ability to transcend cultural barriers, illustrating the universalities of human experience—love, loss, ambition, and fear—thereby fostering a sense of connection and solidarity with people around the world. Khaled Hosseini’s “The Kite Runner” brings to light the challenges and beauties of Afghan culture, while Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies” explores the diaspora experience, highlighting the nuances of identity and belonging.

In a world often divided by borders, ideologies, and cultures, books stand as beacons of hope and understanding, offering a means to see the world through countless lenses. They remind us of our shared humanity, enrich our lives with the beauty of diversity, and inspire us to approach the world with curiosity, empathy, and an open heart. “Seeing the World Through Books” is not merely a theme; it is a testament to literature’s enduring power to connect us across time and space, inviting us on a never-ending journey of discovery and understanding. Through the pages of books, we travel beyond our limitations, exploring the boundless potential of the human spirit to transcend, transform, and unite. □



Photo: Jo / Adobe Stock

Maybe something about the Icelandic horse is sublime—all the travel guides say so—but it didn’t get passed down to my Icelandic horse, the rented beast who ignored every squeeze of leg and rein to plod back to the tour center that winter morning. He’d gone out well enough, following the guide and the group past mountains and lava fields huddled beneath the snow. At some point on the return ride, however, a voice inside his head must have said *screw it* and he slowed to a— no, I can’t even call it a walk. The other riders left me behind, so they never heard my shouts and curses.

Before long fear began to crowd out the rage. I was alone on this abandoned landscape, wind slicing through the full-body thermal suit to my skin. *I could freeze out here.* The horse trudged past features that my panic threw into sharp relief. A spindly white church all by

itself, red door aglow amid the snow and rock. A weathered shack in the shadow of a misshapen mountain.

And snow, silence, wind, snow. I didn’t see sublime until sublime emerged in me: the eerie calm to which my panic often gives way—as if the fear burns itself out, yielding to what is, even when *what is* is an equine crawl through a frigid landscape. In the calm my eyes caught the colors that glittered off the snowpack. The clop of hooves became a metronome that nudged my breath slower. Nothing existed but horse, me, Iceland, all unfolding in their own good time.

I wouldn’t start to practice Zen, with its focus on the here and now, for another fifteen years. At least that’s the story I always told. But now I wonder if the horse was my first teacher: nothing sublime, no thought in his head, just one shaggy foot after the next, clopping. □

The Paris Planet

Giselle DaMier

Illustration: amnaspoka / Adobe Stock



Something yellow illuminated a desolate planet. 50,900 unnecessary street lamps burned 39.46 light years away from Earth.

It used to be called, “The Sunset Planet.” Tidally locked, with one side facing its fiery star and the other frozen in darkness. Lacking a rotational axis, the only habitable portion was a sliver where the sun never sets. Astronomers dubbed this phenomenon the, “Goldilocks Zone.”

It was just right for our glorious getaway; the trip that would last an eternity. We sought our second home on this slice of gilded grace.

In the year 2200 C.E., the earth was rapidly approaching its expiration date. It was high time to start populating a new residence. We resolved to build a single city to start. Unsurprisingly, the world voted to recreate Paris. Even as the planet burned, Earth’s citizens were dreaming about cobblestones, croissants, and bygone bistros.

The first architects took renderings of the City of Light and began construction on what would be renamed, “The Paris Planet.”

“*Make it earthly,*” the public demanded. They wanted markets and menus in a place where food would be limited,

because those who volunteered to leave Earth expected an upgrade. The truth is, you could never capture the refined French attitude in a place that glittered so gold. The real Paris was taupe with silver specks. The Paris Planet was bathed in orange, like a perpetual Mediterranean evening (sans the sea).

A week after my arrival, I met a girl who reminded me of the moon. Ever since I arrived on The Paris Planet, I missed the moon. We didn't have anything reliable in our orbit.

"Were you afraid when you left Earth?" She asked, with more tenderness than curiosity.

"Less afraid once I saw photos of the second Champs-Élysées," I smiled.

She smiled back.

"Were you afraid?" I asked in return.

"No. I always wanted to live in Paris," she whispered with starstruck breath.

"It's not the same," I admitted. "It doesn't smell like smoke, and it's crumbling in all the wrong ways."

"I've never been. So, it's Paris to me," she said definitively.

In this sparkling corner of the TRAPPIST-1 system, she seemed to be the only one who did not long for something more. For the rest of us, restlessness and lust reached all-time highs. In the face of the repetitive failures of humanity, everyone was clinging to the very pattern that had caused our downfall. We laughed nervously and made love violently while the faux-limestone buildings deteriorated as quickly as they were built.

I found myself wondering what lay beyond the edges of the sunshiny Goldilocks Zone, and I wasn't the only one. While the success of this interplanetary endeavor relied on constant progress, it was clear that nobody could thrive in a 24-hour day with no night. We were overwhelmed by the hedonistic ambiance of infinite evening.

Everyone on this planet was given a purpose to fulfill, but our collective determination continued to fade under the guise of curiosity. Groups started organizing perilous excursions beyond the city limits. Out of the endless sunset and into the frozen tundra. Discomfort is more addicting than abundance. After all, those who chose to come here were daring enough to leave our burning paradise in the Milky Way.

I looked for my moon girl and caught her staring sweetly into the current-less river. I grabbed her and gave her a heavy kiss.

"What do you think when you look at me?" she asked.

"How I love that you're perfectly still," I replied.

It was true. Infinity felt like a moment with her...until it didn't.

"I'm thinking of venturing out," I admitted sheepishly. Her eyes flashed with betrayal.

"I thought you loved Paris," she whimpered.

"This isn't Paris," I said to the ground.

"Why can't it be?" She pleaded. "You hold hands like this in Paris," she grabbed my hand. "You dance like this in Paris," she pulled me close.

"I watched the sun set behind Notre Dame once," I admitted. "I thought I could live in that moment forever."

"You won't find an escape from it now."

She was right. I escaped Earth for a place where there would be no escape. The marigold hue of the never-changing sky comforted me when I first arrived, but I was beginning to think that humans needed blue.

I realized she was still holding me.

"Are you afraid of being alone?" I asked.

"I don't want to eat breakfast by myself," she murmured.

I took her hand and we sat down on a bridge that seemed to bend if you looked at it for too long.

I pulled out an intergalactic gourmand concoction, meant to mimic a chouquette. I presented it like a prize in the center of my palm.

"This isn't our last breakfast together, or our second-to-last breakfast together," I promised.

She put the entire puff in her mouth and grinned wildly. That's when I knew I had fallen in love on The Paris Planet, where the sun never set over the Seine.

Her grin slowly faded to rumination.

"I've never broken a promise," she said. I believed her. "Have you?"

"Sometimes it's crueler not to give someone hope," I admitted.

The residual sugar was starting to taste sour in her mouth. We both knew I was leaving.

"You don't even know where you're going."

That was the worst thing she could have said; it gave me something to look forward to.

The Paris Planet was meant to save us, but we should have known that cosmic cobblestones would only beget restlessness. A still planet could not shrink our innate desire to be in motion.

But that's what I loved about my moon girl. She seemed to defy all primitive tendencies. I put my arm around her and we watched absolutely nothing happen against the spectacular backdrop. She stared at the riverbank while I watched the horizon. I kissed her again.

It was then that I knew loneliness is bred from familiarity and not strangeness at all. □

The Fabric of Change

Weaving Sustainability into Fashion

Lillian Heimisdottir



Illustration: eireenz / Adobe Stock

In an era where climate change and ethical practices demand attention more than ever, the intersection of sustainable fashion and consumerism has emerged as a pivotal arena for change. The fashion industry, notorious for its significant environmental footprint and often questionable labor practices, stands at the crossroads of criticism and transformation. As consumers become increasingly aware of the impact of their purchasing decisions, the call for sustainable fashion grows louder, beckoning a shift towards more ethical wardrobes. This essay delves into the essence of sustainable fashion, the challenges it faces in a consumer-driven market, and the potential pathways to a more ethical and environmentally friendly fashion industry.

The Ethical Imperative of Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion represents a movement and process towards fostering changes in fashion products and the fashion system towards greater ecological integrity and social justice. It encompasses the entire lifecycle of a product, from design, raw material production, manufacturing, transport, storage, marketing, and final sale, to use, reuse, repair, remake, and recycling of the product and its components. At its core, sustainable fashion aims to reduce the environmental impact of clothing and ensure that the people involved in its production are treated fairly and work under safe conditions.

The ethical imperative of sustainable fashion arises from a stark reality: the fashion industry is one of the world's largest polluters. It is responsible for a significant portion of water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and landfill waste. Moreover, the industry's labor practices have often been criticized for exploitation and unsafe working conditions, particularly in developing countries where regulations can be lax or poorly enforced. Sustainable fashion challenges these norms by advocating for practices that are not only environmentally friendly but also socially responsible.

Consumerism's Role and Challenges

In the realm of sustainable fashion, consumerism wields a paradoxical influence, simultaneously fueling the industry's issues and harboring the potential for transformative change. The allure of fast fashion, characterized by its swift production turnaround, affordability, and trend-driven offerings, caters to and perpetuates a culture of excessive consumption and waste. This model, while economically lucrative, has dire consequences for the environment and ethical standards within the fashion industry. It champions a throwaway culture, where garments are viewed as disposable rather than durable, leading to significant environmental degradation and exploitation within the supply chain.

Yet, the tide of consumer opinion is turning, buoyed by a growing awareness of these issues. Consumers are increasingly wielding their purchasing power as a force for good, advocating for sustainable practices and ethical accountability in the fashion sector. This shift towards sustainable consumerism presents a beacon of hope, suggesting a path forward where fashion and environmental stewardship can coexist harmoniously.

The journey towards this ideal, however, is fraught with obstacles. One of the most significant barriers is the perceived and real cost differential between fast fashion and its sustainable counterparts. Sustainable fashion, with its emphasis on ethical labor practices, quality materials, and environmentally friendly production methods, often comes with a higher price tag. This price disparity can make sustainable options less accessible to a broad audience, especially in a market dominated by cost-conscious consumers. The challenge lies in debunking the myth that sustainable fashion is inherently cost-prohibitive and in emphasizing the long-term economic and environmental benefits of investing in quality and sustainability over quantity and disposability.

The resolution of these challenges demands a collective effort from all stakeholders in the fashion ecosystem. Brands must prioritize transparency, ethical practices, and environmental responsibility, not as marketing strategies, but as foundational principles of their operations. Consumers, for their part, must adopt a more mindful approach to consumption, recognizing the power of their purchases to effect change. By choosing quality over quantity, supporting ethical brands, and advocating for industry-wide reforms, consumers can contribute to a more sustainable and equitable fashion industry.

Pathways to a Sustainable Fashion Future

For brands, this means committing to transparency, investing in sustainable materials and processes, and rethinking the fast fashion model. For consumers, it involves educating themselves on the impacts of their fashion choices, supporting ethical brands, and adopting a more mindful approach to consumption, such as buying less but better quality, choosing second-hand, and recycling or donating unwanted clothes.

Sustainable fashion and consumerism are entwined in the challenge of reshaping an industry entrenched in unsustainable practices. While obstacles remain, the growing awareness and demand for ethical fashion signal a promising shift. By embracing sustainability as a core value, the fashion industry can transform into a force for good, leading the way towards a future where fashion not only looks good but also does good for the environment and society. □

At the Last Boundary

Gloria D. Gonsalves

Here at the border with the ocean
I become nameless into vastness,
an end of poetry from the mountains.

I bring gifts from the streams:
silt, rocks, minerals, and freshness.
Sometimes life forms come with me.

My journey here was beautiful and sad.
Throughout the landscapes, I nurtured life
and witnessed efforts to rid it from me.

I had to stretch and shrink in the falls;
I had to bend and twist in the valleys;
I had to swell and overflow in the banks.

You ask how it is that I am high or low.
I say travel backward and upward to
where the air is crisp and the clouds afloat.

When there, allow yourself to feel God
in the snowy peaks above your head and
the rumbling sounds beneath your feet.

See the divine in the falling of water;
smell the Garden of Eden in the pastures;
hear spirituality in the howls of wildlife.

Then come back to this last boundary
and tell me whether I should disappear
like a droplet or an iceberg in the ocean.

Single Party State

William Fleeson



Blloku wasn't much cooler after nightfall. The neighborhood lay under an oppressive humidity, equal to that of its end-of-summer afternoon. A different kind of heat would settle in, the later it got and the more crowded the avenues grew with the young libidinous. Blloku was studded, true to its history, with bars and clubs and other playgrounds of the sensual.

Pánche, my driver, and I had only arrived in Tirana, the Albanian capital, from Skopje, in North Macedonia, several hours before. At the border crossing into Albania, the customs officer didn't bother to stamp our passports.

Hiring a driver was less luxurious than it might sound. I paid US prices for Macedonian service in a beat-up Volkswagen Jetta. COVID-19 had shut down the trains and buses that normally traverse the region. Across the Balkans, car rental services charged as much as they

could. As for Pánche, he was a smiling, affable twenty-something. Somewhere nearby he had rented a room, cheaper than my hotel, and gone to bed early.

I wanted, in this Balkan Gomorrah, to see the partyers go by. Blloku—"The Block," in Albanian—was once the exclusive live-and-play district of the country's Communist Party elite, guarded from the rest of Tirana by armed soldiers, and with boutiques, nightspots, and restaurants as good as in the decadent West. Corruption and debauchery transpired in Blloku as a matter of social right. After communism's fall, and the halting arrival of democracy, the neighborhood adapted to post-Cold-War life, welcoming the gyrating masses into what became the red-hottest nightclub zone in Albania.

The street where I was sitting, called Eighth Brigade, channeled people up and down. There rolled a steady procession of tricked-out fine motors, most of them

blasting club hits in English and Albanian. Once parked, the riders churned like waves from one velvet rope to the next, sharing cigarettes and laughs and, maybe later, sex.

In an open-air restaurant above Eighth Brigade, on a raised, streetside, people-watching patio, a waiter denied me a table. He seated me just inside, in the not-VIP section, with its inferior view.

After ten seconds, two tall and very blonde women strutted off the street to the same table I had wanted. They laid the little *RESERVED* plaque on the patio floor. They didn't look around to ask. The same waiter appeared before them instantly. At their service.

Later, the waiter talked with me a bit, as if to show some consideration. He justified his occupation.

"I have master's of accounting. But I cannot find job—no connections. This is corruption! So I work here," he said, shoulders shrugged in resignation.

No one wore COVID masks. No one seemed responsible enough, on this Monday night at the end of August, to care.

“The most beautiful cars, the most beautiful girls,” the waiter promised me, once a post-pandemic normalcy returns to Blloku. Weren’t the cars and girls here now, and in spades?

“These girls, they walk everywhere,” the waiter said. “They drink. Top shelf only! They leave and don’t pay. Or their mens pay. Mens they just met. These girls don’t give a fahk. And police? They only stand on corner. They are police of nahthing. They don’t give a fahk. Tonight? Tonight is no people. It is Mahnday! This is nahthing. Come back to here after kahrona-veerooss. Then you will see *real* Teerana pahrties.”

“Isn’t there a curfew? What time is that?”

“Twenty meenoots, we close.” He moved off to greet a party of four—one fortyish man, three younger women—who were settling into a corner booth.

As he passed, a moment later, he repeated, “Twenty meenoots,” getting pushy again. “I bring your bill.” He had a living to make.

Young lovelies kept flowing to and from the restaurant, onto the streets, up from basements and into dark lounges. Their presence bade a physical fahk-you to the curfew. They mixed under Tirana’s hot black night. They claimed my table as soon as I left.

In dimmest light I tied my shoes with still-sleepy fingers. The alarm clock had sounded for when I had set it, too early, for a jog in the city before breakfast. It was the first of the month. September had come and brought autumn rain with it. *Summer’s over*, it seemed to say.

My own time, the day here, was short: I would run, grab breakfast, and go to a place my guidebook called a ‘museum of surveillance.’ I planned to tag up with Pánche for a southeasterly drive back to North Macedonia—bound for the storied Lake Ohrid, a place of multi-faith pilgrimage and mysticism. There I wanted to take a few days’ deliberate rest. My experience of Tirana would be a hit-and-run affair, like the assignations which had no doubt taken place the previous night in

Blloku’s apartments, in its alleys, in the clubs themselves.

From the hotel entrance I hit the wet pavement, my strides stiff, for the few hundred yards north to the river Lana. The word ‘river’ aggrandizes what actually moves through Tirana: the Lana runs down a cement culvert, the water inch-deep. The steady rain dampened my clothes. I turned right along its bank, plodding east.

As I ran upriver the Lana trickled past, its fluid overwhelmed by the layers of litter and other garbage in the concrete ditch, on the sidewalks, along the roads on the river’s either side. Buildings crowded along the thoroughfare, with an abundance of apartments and offices, but nearly nowhere were there street signs or markers. After fifteen minutes, my legs and my eyes having woken up together, I came to the edge of Tirana proper. The road fractured, crumbling into asphalt scree, and gave out. The stray dogs outnumbered the early-morning pedestrians and bus commuters who huddled under the dirty half-roofed stops. Steam lifted from the pavement. I crossed the Lana by a bridge, its cracks studded with grass, its handrails rusted and bent.

One image redeemed the entirety of that humid, ugly dawn:

Just before turning south from the Lana back to my hotel, I caught sight of a young couple. The young man steered a bicycle, his lady riding side-saddle on the flat frame over the back wheel. Just as they passed me, the man reached back his hand, patting the woman. She did not want reassurance. She gently pressed away his gesture. Again he reached back, with a quiet insistence. This time the woman accepted his hand, gathering it into hers. They rode like that, bonded, sliding toward some future destination. Possibly home, and to make love.

The couple’s affection seemed a quiet rejoicing, a celebration in defiance of the wet dark morning. The scene conquered every negative in the dirty surrounding city. For them also, it was a new season. They chose to seize its promise.

Back at the hotel entrance, my jog finished, my mind washed in rain and a small new hope, I rode the elevator toward a shower and the rest of the day.

“The past is never dead. It isn’t even past,” the quote scrawled, beside a sketch of William Faulkner, who is credited with the expression. These and other words filled a wall of the first exhibit room in the House of Leaves, a



Tirana’s museum of surveillance, also known as the “House of Leaves,” served as a base for the clandestine activities of the Enver Hoxha regime (1944-1985). The site hosted detentions, interrogations, and torture, among other patterns of repression.



A view of Skanderbeg Square, central Tirana. The space, a popular pedestrian zone, offers a view of the Albanian capital's traditional and modern architecture, from the minarets of mosques and the Soviet-era Palace of Culture (center) to high-rise buildings.

blacksite-turned-museum in downtown Tirana. The place draws its prosaic name from the quiet friction of leaves in a tree—the tree being the government, the branches its ministries of domestic control, and the leaves the frightened whispers of a subjugated people.

The building was once used by the Sigurimi, the shorthand for Albania's sprawling internal security services and police, which for most of the 20th century administered a republic of repression at a scale and depth rare even among the world's fellow despotisms of the same period. Yesterday's Albania was something like today's North Korea.

A certain erudition defined the museum, which educates visitors about the crimes and longevity tactics of the regime of Enver Hoxha, the autocrat who for decades ruled Albania as a self-isolating communist state. Two events—Hoxha's death in 1985, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991—would collapse Albania's communist project also.

The museum did not bear very good witness. I was the only visitor for the two full hours of my time there. A middle-

aged docent followed me from room to room. In charity we might assume that such shadowing was museum policy, to safeguard the artifacts. But it made the house's testament to surveillance a little too palpable. The feeling of being watched, of constant nervous fear of observation, gave me a keen anxiety, if only for the duration of my museum visit.

Did last century's Albanians feel the same, their whole lives? Is that why their children partied so hard—to shake off the nerves of un-freedom and its intergenerational toll? In Tirana, liberty led to libertinage.

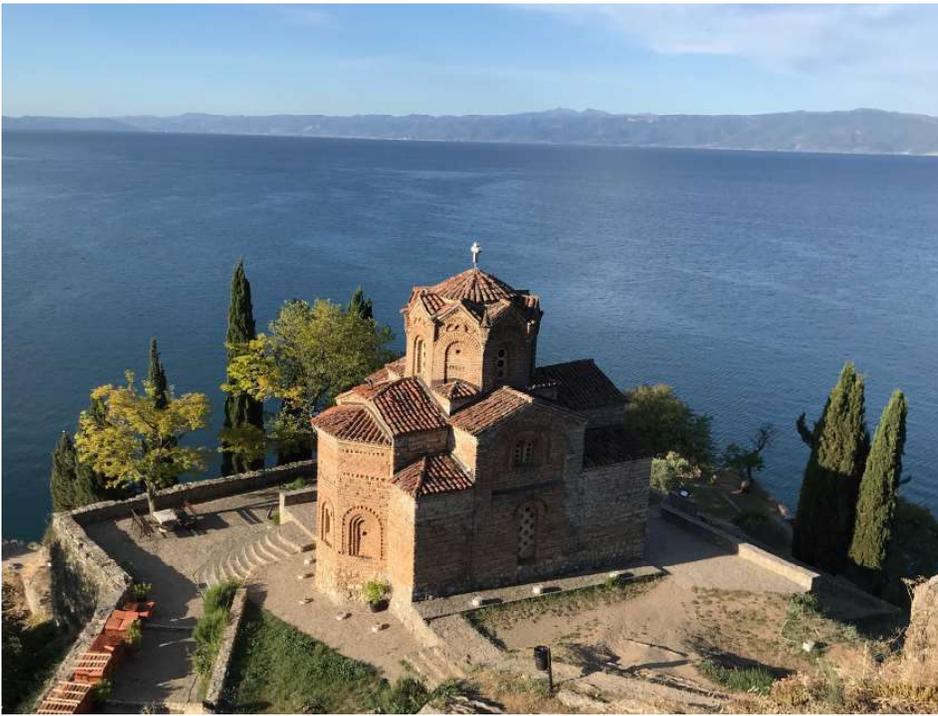
I passed rooms filled with listening devices of Chinese and Soviet vintage—each was a Marxist-Leninist brother country, after all. On a table, a diagram of the Albanian government's organizational chart was laid out in the form of a many-legged beetle, a flight of museological fancy; the beetle bore a label on each leg representing an actual bureau or department of the Sigurimi. Hoxha ran a terror state par excellence, cowing the populace into a submission lasting generations. Show trials, prison-

labor camps, obliterations of privacy, and citizen-spying—among coworkers, classmates, even parents denouncing their children and vice-versa—would typify life in Albania for fifty years. Religious believers were special targets, as their creeds undermined the God-Government which Hoxha espoused. Particularly insidious were the midnight arrests, when a father or mother was disappeared from a family as spouse and children watched. While still in an arrestee's home, officers confiscated family photos, denying relatives even the memory of those consumed by the state.

When an Albanian family would ask on what charges their loved one had been imprisoned or killed, the Sigurimi would say only: "The Party knows..."

So it went until communism's rupture. Those wounds, borne across Albanian history and the diaspora today, are still healing. The House of Leaves taught me that much, at least.

Pánche and I met up at 3pm. We pulled out of Tirana to cooler air, green slopes, and white sun. I felt the old



The Church of Saint John at Kaneo, overlooking Lake Ohrid. The house of worship dates from the 13th century.

tension: of loving the road, and the instant melancholy of leaving a place where one has just formed an attachment. Tirana slipped across the unbridgeable distance between “You are here” and “You were there”—an experience labored, delivered, newborn.

The place names grew more exotic as we wound south through the Albanian countryside, and higher, toward the mountainous North Macedonian border. Elbasan, Hotolisht, Xhyrë, Qukës, Prrenjas, Rrajcë. The sinuous highway jostled Pánche and me both.

On a switchback along the side of one mountain, Pánche stopped so we could take in the view. The valley floor had been plotted out—how many centuries ago?—into skinny parcels. A reservoir shined like mercury. The mountains stood in emerald and beige. To watch the valley was to look back, like Lot’s wife toward Sodom, to a worldly town we had just quit. We were leaving this for Lake Ohrid, the place of pilgrimage. We moved on faith, approaching the unseen.

The Albanian attendant at the border crossing, on the mountaintop near the village of Qafë Thanë, looked not entirely conscious. It may have been the heat, or the boredom that poisons low-level functionaries every day on the job. She shuffled our passports and forms and pushed everything back with the grossest indifference.

We descended the mountain into North Macedonia, Pánche dodging deep potholes at full speed. I flipped through the pages of my passport. There was no stamp for Albania. No entry and no exit. As if we, too, had been made to disappear. Pánche and I sped on. We were coming into another land. The sheen of Lake Ohrid was as alluring, as seductive, as Blloku had been. □



A scene from the Kaneo area of Ohrid town, North Macedonia. The Albania-North Macedonia border runs through the lake.

In the Kitchen

Bec Ehlers



Photo: Bec Ehlers

Ingredients strewn across the counter, appliances plugged in and blinking, Trixie and Katya softly gabbing in the background – it’s showtime, baby. I have my new apron on, soft white linen all the way from Riccione, stamped with “Sto Cucinando” – I’m cooking. The stark statement of fact reminds me of when I’d be complimenting my roommate’s cat, asking the tabby, *Are you so handsome? Are you such a fierce hunter? Are you just the sweetest baby?* And Esther (in the early days of our relationship, still trying to impress me) would attempt to play along and ask, *Are you a kitty cat?* Esther’s mom sent the apron and clearly

stated it was for me, not Esther. My mother says Esther is an absolute delight. Esther’s mother says I’m karma, comeuppance for too much childhood sass. I love animals, children, camping, scary movies, I am the amalgamation of Esther’s worst nightmares. But I cook for her, which helps

Tonight, we will have vegan moussaka and rosemary focaccia. Rather, we will have vegan moussaka and rosemary focaccia if I haven’t forgotten a crucial ingredient, if I don’t miss a vital step, if I don’t lose focus halfway through and let something burn. After our first date, I offered to walk Esther home; halfway there, I realized that my bus was coming shortly and if I missed

it I would have to wait an hour for the next one, or recalibrate my route to account for multiple transfers between buses and trains. So I sprinted away from her, my overshirt flapping behind me. Much later, she’d tell me she’d wanted to kiss me, but between the masks and the running and the first date, it didn’t happen. She would also tell me that’s when she realized I was a hectic sort of human.

I slice the top off a head of garlic and place it on a piece of tinfoil, drizzle olive oil over the papery lump, and wrap it tightly in the foil. It goes into the oven to roast. The eggplant needs to sweat its bitterness out (don’t we all), and I cut it lengthwise into strips. Sweating it means sprinkling salt over the strips, front and back, and laying them in a colander to pucker beads of moisture up to their surfaces. The lentils are rinsed, drained, poured into a pot of water. We don’t eat much meat these days; I could pretend it’s our rock-solid ethics, but it’s really because Esther insists I overcook every animal protein I touch. When I told my mom, she said I learned from the best.

Carl Sagan said, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” If you wish to make a loaf of bread but the universe already exists, you must first proof your yeast. Yeast, sugar, and warm water in the bottom of a bowl. The yeast will start chowing down on the sugar and burst into life – you can see tiny spots of foaminess pop up over the surface of the water as the yeast declares itself alive, turning into a soft dome of eukaryotes.

Now, flour, salt, and olive oil, up to my wrists in it. When I’m pissed off, I knead Paul Hollywood style, rolling and slapping and rolling and slapping the dough against a cutting board and sending flour into every crack in the linoleum. When I’m not, I hold it firmly but gently. I fold the dough and press it into itself, fold and press, fold and press. It’s how I taught the kids I nannied to do it. We’d work hand over hand and

repeat the steps out loud as we went. I wonder if they ever bake bread now that I'm gone?

I cover the bowl with a damp towel and place it on the stovetop, where the heat from the garlic roasting for the bechamel can work its way up and help the dough rise.

The lentils are boiling and I'm falling behind. I quarter an onion and send it through the food processor for a quick whirl – lazy. Scrub dirt from the mushrooms, trim them, and throw them in the food processor, too. Double lazy.

We're coming up with our own recipes as we build a life together in Oregon, recipes that lack the kind of overlap needed for comparison. Since we left New York, Esther misses bagels, her mom's chicken soup, real pizza, pad see ew with Chinese broccoli instead of American broccoli, egg and cheese sandwiches on a kaiser roll.

I've made bagels and they weren't quite right, but they were our bagels and thus a thing apart. Pizza we've been making at home for as long as we've been together; my pizza isn't a New York slice, but it's not trying to be and that counts for a lot. Chicken soup...well. I make chicken soup, but not the right kind.

"My mom makes it the Jewish way," Esther says. "By cooking a whole chicken. Yours is still good, it's just different."

I love it when she talks about Jewish food, maybe mostly as my family has little by way of food tied to our heritage. We have dishes specific to our family; there's just nothing more culturally significant to them than "white as saltines." Spaghetti hotdog casserole, a dish my mom concocted for me with noodles, sauce, chopped hot dogs, and dairy free cheddar cheese – it tastes like plateauing at swim meets and flubbed auditions and tears over algebra, and all of it being okay because I was still a kid. I made it spring 2020 because it was easy, but mostly because I missed my mom. My roommate, Faye, kept trying to give me sprigs of fresh basil from her plant to put on it and I had to repeat over and over, "It's not a fresh herb kind of dish." Pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse that Dad gave little chocolate chip faces. Magic sleep potion (water and cinnamon) that so thoroughly knocked out the kids I nannied that I had to text their parents and warn them no matter what the children said in the morning, they had not been drugged.

Esther saw me on a dating app and commented on a picture of me holding



Photo: Gasspoll / Adobe Stock

a babka. "Chocolate or cinnamon?" she wrote. Chocolate.

She showed the picture to her friend and had to apologize later for false advertising. Her friend lamented, "I thought you'd finally found a nice Jewish boy."

My bad.

We met over sushi, got Thai takeout our second date, and for our third date, I asked her over for ratatouille and fresh bread. The first time she spent the night, she didn't sleep at all. It was loud; that apartment overlooked Malcolm X Boulevard, and I felt lucky there was a tree in front of my window to cut through the cement and leaned-on horns. All day and night, sirens would roll past going to and from Harlem Hospital, music would blast through portable speakers, people laughed and kids cried and at the end of the hall, Miss Cindy rummaged through the trash room for bottles she could return. So Esther lay there and watched me until morning, when I, oblivious, bounced out of bed asking, "Want pancakes?"

"I think that's when I knew cooking was important to you," she says now. "When you had been awake for two minutes and were ready to make me pancakes."

I remember embarrassing myself trying to flip them.

Mushrooms, lentils, onion, diced tomatoes, a few good shakes of nutmeg all

sloshing around the pan together. I taste, season, taste, season.

The bread dough is high enough to push the tea towel into a soft little cap. I scoop it out of the bowl and lay it on a lined baking sheet, pushing it down, stretching it towards the corners of the pan. Draping the towel over it again.

I am Dr. Frankenstein, this is my monster. Behold, underneath the shroud he begins to rise!

I started making bread with everyone else during lockdown, but while some stopped, I kept going. A need for control? Maybe. Something to absorb the chaos? Absolutely. For how long? I don't know.

Esther's home – the door locking behind her and the soft thud of her shoes being kicked off, the slightly scratchy, "Hello!"

She tosses her jacket on a chair and joins me in the kitchen, snaking her arms around my waist and pressing up on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "What is this?" She gestures to the lump of foil on the stove and I slowly unwrap it. A soft gasp. "Did you roast a whole head of garlic?"

"...Are you getting turned on?"

"I mean, fuck me up, it's garlic!"

I scoop up a little of the lentil-mushroom mix and hold it to her lips. "What does it need?"

She hates it when I do this. "I don't know, what do you think it needs?"

“If I knew, would I ask?” But the process of asking her, of waiting for an answer that won’t come, is enough to make me shake a little more nutmeg in.

While she goes to stretch off the day, I finish prepping the loaf for the oven. You can press the indents with a rounded spoon handle, but fingertips work just as well. A speckled terrain, a field of burrows. Brush olive oil across the surface. A light snowfall of rosemary and salt. Into the oven.

To receive, my love language is touch. To give, it’s acts of service, but any service in return makes my stomach twist into wet knots. My old therapist once asked me, *Why don’t you think you’re worth anything?* And I shifted and shuffled and all I could say was, *I don’t know. I don’t know.* So acts of service runs on a one-way street, usually turning into crisp rounds of sourdough or trays of cookies or months of overnight oats prepped for my roommate who could not cope with another of life’s demands. End of 2020 going into 2021, I baked loaf after loaf of bread for my friend RJ because I couldn’t touch her and she didn’t need one more person telling her how sorry they were that after months of caring for her best friend, she went out one day and came back to find that Tanya had died. So I mixed and kneaded it into bread.

You did everything right.

Not even the doctors saw it coming.

Tanya isn’t mad that you weren’t there.

In what world would she have wanted you to see that?

Maybe part of it was me trying to build something stable in a world without Tanya in it. Not feeling as though I was allowed to grieve for her, so trying to help RJ grieve, instead. Whispering to the dough, *there was more light when Tanya was here.*

You can’t fix that with bread, but you can’t fix that with anything. Of the options, I don’t think bread’s a bad try.

I squeeze the roasted garlic out of its husk and into the food processor for the bechamel, and it’s too hot, really. It drives Esther crazy to see me handling pans right off the heat, flipping fresh loaves onto my palms, fingertips turning red as the garlic sticks and burns. I tell her I’m trying to develop asbestos hands – when you’ve damaged the nerves enough that they become less receptive to pain. I tell her this will be helpful for my cooking. I don’t tell her how badly I want to not feel so much.

When I cry over injured goslings at the pond or birds who died at the raptor center, she always says, “The things that make this



Photo: kenwnj / Adobe Stock

so hard for you are the things I love about you.” But sometimes I cannot hold all of this ache.

Cashews, olive oil, nutritional yeast, and salt whizzed with the garlic. I sample, adjust, and realize I don’t actually know what bechamel tastes like, so maybe I should leave it alone. Pat the food processor – my MVP. *Goodnight, sweet prince.*

Growing up, Mom did the cooking, Dad did the cleaning. Now, I visit home and find Dad roasting sheet pans of vegetables, stuffing bell peppers with spiced quinoa, marinating meat for fajitas. A habit that began when he’d retired, but she had not, when he had time, it makes sense. Part of me, though, wonders if he’s preparing for a day when they are no longer equals, when he’s caring for the both of them. When her brain has iced over with plaque and she’s too far away from us to make chicken piccata or the chocolate cake I’ve requested every birthday since I was eight. When I lived two thousand miles from her, she would bake it, pack it securely into a box, and two-day ship it to me. Nowhere her love couldn’t reach me.

I lay the eggplant slices across the bottom of a casserole dish, pour on the lentil-tomato-mushroom mix, another layer of eggplant, another layer of filling, another layer of eggplant, bechamel sliding into every crevice.

Esther wanders back into the kitchen as I’m pulling out the focaccia.

“Oh, that’s going to be a good one,” she says.

“Want to hear it sing?” I ask, and she says of course she does. Always.

I drizzle extra oil across the bread and the loaf hisses and sighs as it sinks in. Every drop sucked into the crusty top.

Above the kitchen sink, framed by the neighbor’s cherry blossom tree, I’m growing basil. Two basil plants, actually. One we know to be Italian, another that might be Thai? Maybe? It’s not very good. I’m still debating whether or not to murder it and replant more Italian basil, but I keep hesitating. The Thai plant can’t help not being what I’d expected.

They both get my care, but the Italian basil gets my affection. I’ve been misting its leaves, pouring cups of water into the pot, and rotating it to make sure it gets even sun exposure. When I found a worm in our bathtub, I popped it in the dirt. I looked up how to harvest the leaves and I think I did it wrong; new leaves have sprouted lopsided and desperate. But it smells good when I’m washing dishes. It looks cheerful on the windowsill.

So far, I haven’t killed it. My goal these days is to keep things alive. Things other than me, but also especially me. No matter how long this basil lives, though, I will not add it to my spaghetti hot dog casserole. Some dishes are just not fresh herb dishes. Maybe I’ll pull the Thai basil, though, and plant rosemary instead. Place it soft and fragrant on loaves of focaccia. See what grows here. □

Freshman Folly

Linda Boroff



Photo: Fotoluminate LLC / Adobe Stock

Returning late from class this morning, Ariel encounters her roommates perched side by side on the sofa, like some inquisitional tribunal or a trio of tourist art trolls.

“Well hi there!” She blurts. Then—frozen by their averted gazes—merely stares. Apprehension curdles the cinnamon roll bolted before her Pre-Shakespearean drama class, washed down with vending machine coffee whose bitter dregs recur now on her tongue like an admonition. Oh why must life be so adversarial? Why must every extended pseudopod trigger a territorial war? Every paramecium covet its neighbor’s spicule? Can’t anything alive ever just get along?

Randi, the budding Gulag prison laundry terror squad enforcer, sits in the middle like a balance weight. On her right, Kathy is a middle-management sycophant under construction. Sue, the detached pseudo-academic, shifts on her bony buttocks to gaze out the window. How distasteful are these roommate skirmishes must be to the daughter of a Philosophy Department Chair and niece of a top NASA administrator.

“Why don’t you put your books down.” Randi emits a little laugh, a sort of cough.

Following her cue, the others cough-laugh as well. Ariel doesn’t move. Randi rolls her eyes: this won’t be easy.

“Why don’t you just tell me the outcome of your plotting?” Ariel’s voice gravels like some Neolithic bog mummy poking up from the mud.

“Very well,” says Randi. “We’ve decided that it would be best for everyone if you just... move out.”

“B-but... why?” Trying for crisp and sharp, she produces a whimper.

Randi shakes her head, and they all follow suit. “We feel like you’re just not a fit. I mean, we could go over the reasons one by one, but that would only hurt you.”

Ariel’s autonomic nervous system launches a rosy flush across her face, while her mouth twitches downward, clownlike. Her eyes brim. Had it been that washed bra puddling on the bathroom floor? Her cereal bowl on the coffee table *one* time, maybe twice?

But the real question is, what character deficit caused her to move in with these bitches in the first place? They even chart egg consumption, a neat little grid affixed by ladybird magnet to the refrigerator door.

Worst, they have reduced Ariel to lying: She had told Randi, a cardiologist’s daughter, that her father was “in enterprise system sales,” when in reality, he pitches plastic wall paneling at Home Depot.

Ariel looks down. The thin paisley carpeting—nauseous ochre, migraine red—is worn into ancient traffic patterns: front door to dining room, bedrooms to bathroom to kitchen; all the footsteps, smudges, soils, vomits, dribbles and grime of renters past and present are trodden in deeply, ineradicably. Disgusting. Why then, does she suddenly feel this irrational longing to live here? Why this terror of detachment?

“It’s for the best, Ariel. Really.” Kathy’s short blonde hair is tucked neatly behind dainty, symmetrical ears whose jade earrings match her contacts perfectly. Weak but not ill-intentioned, she actually reaches out a comforting hand—but a warning glance from Randi locks the gesture into something resembling an upraised Tyrannosaurus claw. The claw descends slowly to her lap.

Meanwhile, Ariel’s new 24-hour mascara now fails spectacularly: Bette Davis in an old horror movie. “Just to satisfy my curiosity,” she snuffles, “why don’t you tell me what really caused you three to gang up?” This sends them into a frenzy of head-twisting and ‘puh-leezeing.

“We did not ‘gang up’,” decries Sue, warm as winter on Neptune.

“...but if you really want to know,” finishes Randi, “you were supposed to do the dishes twice this week to make up for last week And then you only did them once. And you’ve pulled this stunt before.”

“B...but I cleaned the whole bathroom on Saturday when it wasn’t even my turn,” Ariel wails. She had been saving that epic gesture of altruism for just such an occasion as this. But it boomerangs.

“It’s the *principle*, Ariel. We all agreed to a schedule when you moved in.”

“Oh fuck your schedule.”

Randi sits back, wickedly triumphant as Queen Isabella expelling the Jews. Sue gazes resolutely at the floor. Her close-set eyes and mop of curly black hair are not unattractive,

but their owner is oddly inhibited and remote. So was it Ariel's fault that faithless Omar, he of the mischievous cowlick, blue eyes and irresistible grin, had asked her out? And suddenly, she realizes that this confrontation is all, *all*, about men. It has absolutely nothing to do with dishes, eggs, cereal bowls or cleaning schedules.

"I can't help it if Omar... Ariel begins. And sure enough, they all blaze up like kerosene-soaked tinder.

"You just think you're so hot." Kathy reveals her inner predator at last. "You and your nose job and your Farrah Fawcett 1977 hairdo. Sue couldn't care less if that little worm Omar asked you out."

"Why don't you start packing?" Randi actually rubs her hands together, channeling Ebenezer Scrooge or Iago...

"And what if I don't want to?" Ariel tosses her 1977 hair. "And there's the little matter of the lease we all signed." But of course they already had the landlord rewrite the lease for three tenants. A check returning a quarter of the deposit awaits Ariel at the management company. How can she defy such proactive organizational precision? Ariel deflates like a punctured tyre.

"Legally, you *could* stay here," says Randi, "if you have no place to go. Like a charity case."

"I have plenty of places to go," Ariel retorts. "And I would rather die than stay." Which is, of course, exactly the humiliating route they have mapped out and now goaded her into taking. Where will she sleep?

Sometime after midnight, Ariel awakens in bed beside a gently snoring young man whose name she cannot recall. With his blond streaked and tangled curls, he resembles a medieval squire, a troubadour out of the *Roman de la Rose*. And sure enough, a guitar is propped against the wall beside the book *Lambda Calculus for Dummies*. A laptop. An empty wine jug. A near-empty bottle of tequila: *Roman de la Booze*.

Where is she anyway? And how did she get here? Ariel's eyes cross as she tries to merge the lone, bare light bulb in the ceiling with its persistent twin. She deduces, from the steep angle of the walls, that they are in an attic. Beside the bed hangs a whiteboard covered with incomprehensible purple equations. Suddenly, she remembers: he had chivalrously picked up a book dropped on the Sproul Hall steps: Bocaccio—a treacherous read for lonely English majors away from home for the first time.

Propping herself on an elbow, Ariel can just see from the window a stoplight changing from red to green to yellow. To red to green to yellow. To red to green to...

Her blouse is missing a button, but appar-

ently she and Sir Gawain had gotten too drunk to do much more than grope one another before passing out. She hangs her head over the bedside and her anachronistic hairdo tumbles onto the floor in a heap. She studies the scuffed hardwood, streaked with yellow paint.

"I have to get home," Ariel says into the silence. "B..but I have no home."

"Wyzat," Sir Gawain sighs and sleeps again.

Ariel rises, brushes at her clothes, and stumbles toward the door, which opens onto a hallway. A wooden staircase descends to yet another door, and this one conducts her outside into a mangy back yard surrounded by a tall, splintery board fence, all eerily lit by a full, werewolf moon. Groping around the fence, she discovers a gate, which swings wide with a moan onto a deserted street.

She walks unsteadily to the corner, but finds no street sign. Turning, she can no longer see where she came from. The clock behind the window of a closed laundromat says three forty-five. Beyond the corner, the sidewalk slopes downhill, and, to her relief, Ariel spots familiar buildings straight ahead. She is on the North Side!

Ariel crosses and enters the campus, which instantly flows around and absorbs her, bearing her away. She darts from tree to tree, dodging between buildings, her breath coming in short, quiet bursts. In the yard of the Faculty Lounge, she pauses beneath an evergreen to breathe in the cool air, feeling goofily invincible.

The moonlight creates long, oddly mobile shadows that dance about the angular buildings like ghosts. The spirits of students past seem to be out promenading, crowding the banks of the creek, huddling in the ancient leafy glens: coeds in middy-blouses and cloche hats; men called Dink and Swede and Stuff, their leather football helmets hanging from their arms. The campus belongs to departed spirits during these hours. And Ariel is among and of them. Here at least, she is a fit. She passes under Sather Gate, ornate as a fairy crown. Sproul Hall broods down from its august, Doric-pillared façade, beckoning her into its riotous political past.

Across the quad, Ariel tries the door of the Student Union, and to her surprise, it glides open. She prowls to the restroom, splashes her face, then enters a stall. Settling herself on the toilet, she props her feet up against the door, sighs, and sleeps at last.

She is awakened by female chatter; fluorescent lights blaze, doors bang. Swollen-headed, she tries to stand: her tailbone aches; her legs, stiff and unwieldy, nearly collapse under her. Trying to look academic and purposeful, Ariel totters past the long mirror without glancing at her image, and bolts outdoors, where the campus now teems with

modern life. The Campanile announces eight-forty. Gratefully, she recalls that her now ex-roommates have early class today.

At the apartment, Ariel's name is already gone from the entryway mailbox. An alien from the farthest reaches of the parsec couldn't have belonged here any less. Shivering with apprehension, she uses her key, and the door opens with a grudging, put-upon squawk.

Rapidly now, she packs her worn suitcase. She turns a slow circle in the living room, static in its morning emptiness, chilly with weak sunlight that struggles through the sliding glass door to form a pallid blotch on the carpet.

Outside, a brief deck enclosed with a flimsy wrought iron fence looks down onto College Avenue, where students stride and stroll, oblivious to the mawkish human drama unfolding only a few feet above them. Ariel's eyes suddenly sting, but she stifles the reflex, trapping the tears in their wells, turning the apartment into a blurry underwater world.

A therapist had once advised her to mock and exaggerate her fears, and Ariel tries this now: "I will never again make a single new friend or find shelter on the entire planet," she tells herself. But rather than reassuring her, the exercise only deepens her dread. Her life appears in retrospect to be headed toward some event horizon, a black hole of rejection and failure, its traction drawing her inexorably.

Retrieving her poodle magnet from the refrigerator door, Ariel nearly cries again. On impulse, she opens the door and peeks inside. And there, perched alone on a shelf like a queen, sits a cake:

Happy Birthday, Kathy

Friendship Is Forever

it declares in elegant chocolate cursive. The frosting is lavish antique yellow, its silky buttercream dotted with glossy pink rosettes. Tiny green marzipan leaves sprout from vines twining voluptuously around its circumference.

Had it been a sheet cake, flat and rectangular, it wouldn't have fitted into the toilet at all. But this cake is round and layered, so it sinks neatly, intact, floating a little unsteadily at first, and then, as it absorbs water, settling gently into a level position. The writing is elevated above the water line, so the sentiment will likely endure for hours, framed by the white seat.

Outside, the sunshine attacks Ariel's eyes like shards of broken glass as she heads toward Telegraph Avenue with her suitcase, legs still rubbery but functional. When she reaches Dwight Way, a breeze hits her face, so fresh and wholesome that she almost laughs despite her bruised heart. □

Job Interview

Heimir Steinarsson

Where do you see yourself five years from now?

he asked, and looked at me presumptuously.

I shook my head and said I didn't know.

My future is a mystery to me.

What vision do you have for your career?

Career, I scoffed. I only want a job to pay the rent and buy some clothes to wear and get essential groceries from the shop.

What are your major strengths and weaknesses?

I guess my strength is that I'm not yet dead, while I am sure my greatest weakness is that I have trouble getting out of bed.

Well, thank you very much, I think that's all.

Don't bother waiting for a comeback call.





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