AY2526 SPRING ISSUE

yeast

NUSSU THE RIDGE
MAGAZINE


Pulse of
nuts

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dear readers,

Have you ever thought about yeast?
I mean truly thought about it,
not just appreciate the breads and brews it's used to produce.
Have you ever seen the way it grows, swells,
bubbles, and pops? It's mother and daughter, origin and end.
It's a symbol of life and it hungers to survive.
In this edition of The Ridge, we gaze at yeast from inside and out,
watching how it develops into identity, (counter-)culture, and community.
How it shapes adulthood, how it gives rise to our desire for change,
and how it leaves us with hope.

I'd like to give another round of applause to our contributors this magazine cycle, without whom we wouldn't have a magazine to celebrate and study the intricacies of "yeast". They have worked tirelessly throughout the semester to put our magazine together - thank you so much for being here (even if you couldn't be physically here!)

Alright, I've said enough. Do you hear that?
It's time for the yeast to bloom.
If you've read our work before, we're glad to see you again.
And if you're new here, welcome.
We hope this magazine helps you find a moment to
breathe in this pressure-cooker world.

Koh Ying Xi, Zander
editor-in-chief

disclaimer

The Ridge is the largest student-run magazine in National University of Singapore (NUS) and compiles works from NUS students based on their interpretations of the themes presented in each issue. The views expressed in the magazine are those of the individual authors and do not reflect the official stance of the NUS or its affiliates. The inclusion of any establishment names or logos in the magazine does not imply endorsement of their organisation or products.

The primary objective of The Ridge is to provide a platform for students to critically examine and engage with both local and global events, social phenomena, and cultural habits. The Ridge aims to foster a space for open dialogue while striving to be sensitive and respectful when addressing issues related to race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, and politics.

We are committed to producing and publishing original content created by NUS students. Content may include the use of literary devices like satire and metaphor, or reference historical texts, pop culture, and academic discourse. These techniques are employed to enhance dramatic effect and provoke thought on the topics discussed.

We encourage our readers to engage critically with the ideas presented and explore the cited sources for a more comprehensive understanding of the topics discussed.

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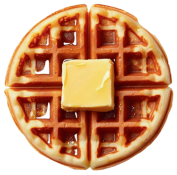

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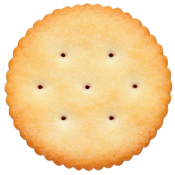

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Homesteader? I Hardly Know Her!

by Megan Tay Jia-Xin

The Romanticisation of Homesteading

Instead of feeling your heart stop every morning at the sound of your alarm, imagine waking up to the sound of chirping birds. Instead of stumbling out the door towards a packed MRT cabin, imagine riding a bike through a field of wildflowers. Instead of scarfing down a cold sandwich from the local convenience store during your lunch break, imagine eating a steaming omelette made from fresh eggs.

Such is the idyllic dream that homesteading influencers sell.



In a world dominated by mass production, homesteading is a step away from modern consumerist culture. As Evie Delaney writes for House & Garden, homesteading "involves cultivating food, raising livestock, and often producing your own energy and goods. A homestead typically includes a home, farmland, and various outbuildings like barns or greenhouses, with enough space to grow food and potentially raise animals." [1]

However, homesteading influencers have overblown the simplistic image of homesteading. They post videos of themselves tending to fluffy sheep in a rolling green field, picking fruit off garden vines, and cooking delicious meals with the freshest ingredients. They advertise homesteading as a "better" lifestyle than what most of their cosmopolitan viewers are living. They romanticise homesteading. By glorifying the value of self-sufficiency, they ask you: Why would you ever go to a dismal local grocery store when everything you need could be in your backyard?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people globally rushed to stock up their shopping carts over fears of food supplies being threatened.[2] Since then, the idea of being able to fully live off of nature's bounty, without having to worry about potential disruption in your local supply chains—this assurance in being able to rely on oneself to survive has become incredibly seductive.

The concept of homesteading becomes even more attractive through the lens of social media. Intercut: Clips of saturated flower fields, happy animals frolicking in pastures, and an even happier family smiling at the camera as the perfect Fleetwood Mac song plays in the background.

Here, social media does what it does best—showing only the 'pretty' aspects of the homesteading narrative, and somewhat concealing its darker realities.

The Gritty Reality of HomeSteading

Admittedly, some influencers expose the grittier side of homesteading. Amongst the aesthetic 'fluff', there are videos that aim to provide viewers with tips for starting their own homesteads. These videos include recipes of foods that can be made from scratch, lists of animals to keep for meat, eggs, or milk, and what kinds of soil to buy to yield the best harvest. These videos, which highlight the amount of effort and work that goes into maintaining a successful homestead, brings the labour of homesteading into light.

While researching for this article, I was slightly horrified to watch @leahshomestead's TikTok where she filmed dozens of adorable bunnies hopping into their hutch, accompanied by a cheery voiceover stating that the "meat rabbits" would be "ready to process in 12 weeks".[3]

Even though there are some influencers as candid as Leah in highlighting how homesteading is ultimately a product of (meat rabbit) blood, sweat, and tears, social media often obscures the underlying truths behind what is shown on our screens. In these highly curated Instagram reels, you just get a general idea of the work needed to maintain a homestead. You hardly see the exhausting hours spent hunched over in the garden, preserving food, and even finding ways to source your own energy supply.



Besides the back-breaking physical labour, homesteading can hurt your pockets, too.

Homesteading blog Our Simple Homestead broke down the costs they funnelled into their homestead in South Carolina, including a $2800 water well, $1800 septic system and a $2000 hen house. Additionally, there were the costs of the land they built these structures on, the house they live in, and various tools they need to homestead.[4] All this to say, even a "simple" homestead is expensive.

This may seem incongruous because of the perceivably rustic aesthetic of homesteading. When one looks at a chicken coop that is literally full of feathers and faeces, one doesn't always think of the cost of materials to build the coop, the price of chicken feed, and the price of the chickens themselves.

The price of self-sufficiency is high: both physically and financially. However, the mechanism of social media, where experiences are reduced to beautiful, one-dimensional photos and videos, enables influencers to romanticise homesteading while successfully downplaying its undesirable elements.

Will Raising Chickens Make Me A Better Wife?

Homesteading can evidently be more complicated than expected. Besides the physical labour and financial burdens,

homesteading is steeped in an ideology of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and independence.

Interestingly, in an American context (where a majority of these homesteader influencers reside), these are values more commonly associated with the right side of the political spectrum. Some "core principles of conservatism" as touted by U.S. congressman Mike Johnson are "Individual Freedom" and "Limited Government".[5] These values overlap with the driving values behind homesteading: the desire to survive on one's own without having to rely on other people or institutions.

Furthermore, homesteading is often associated with traditional homemaking and domestic duties interlinked with conventional gender roles. Like homesteading TikToker Gwen The Milkmaid says, she has "the feminine urge to take care of [her] husband and make him food all the time".[6]

Though planting a vegetable garden may not seem like an inherently political act, ideology and politics are deeply embedded in homesteading and its ideal of self-sufficiency.

One Home(stead), One Heart, One Singapore?



Even in Singapore, the notion of farming our way toward self-reliance is political.

Even in Singapore, the notion of farming our way toward self-reliance is political. Due to limited space and resources, Singaporeans have to find more creative workarounds, like making use of hydroponics, creating vertical farms along high rise buildings, or using other marginal spaces like rooftop carparks. Here, homesteading has less to do with conservative ideals or traditional gender norms, but more so the need to provide for ourselves.

As a small island nation heavily dependent on food imports, Singapore is highly vulnerable to external shocks and global disruptions. That was what sparked Singapore's "30 by 30" goal to locally produce 30% of Singapore's food needs by 2030 in 2019,[7] a goal which the government has reshaped and continually chipped at to improve food security in Singapore. Singapore's attempts to be self-reliant through sourcing our own food could be seen in alignment with the desire for independence many homesteaders have.

As Soon As I Finish Writing This Article, I'm Buying A Meat Rabbit

Independence and one's ability to self-source food may be increasingly essential today, where tariffs, inflation and climate issues have led to food price hikes.[8] However, achieving this golden pinnacle of self-sufficiency is difficult—much more difficult than homesteading influencers make it seem, and certainly more time-consuming and draining for one's bank account. Unless you have muscles of steel and piles of money lying around (hit me up, shawty), homesteading in its TikTok-ified form simply might not be achievable for the modern-day urban resident.



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Yeast Indies: Colonialism and Southeast Asian Confectionery

By Gabriel Wong Kai En

"All sorrows are less with bread."
— Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605)

Ever wondered where the breads we eat come from? Southeast Asia was not historically built on wheat, but colonialism accelerated its adoption across the region. Wheat reached the region before the Europeans did, likely through Chinese trade routes, but it was never planted or grown at scale successfully. Tropical heat and humidity are not conducive to the crop. Colonial projects instead brought wheat already grown and processed into flour: French administrators in Vietnam, Spanish friars in the Philippines, Dutch merchants in the Indonesian archipelago.

While we might associate modern bakeries in Southeast Asia with fluffy breads and flaky pastries, the most traditional Southeast Asian confections are glutinous, sticky things, often formed from rice—boiled, milled, pressed into cakes. How, then, did some iconic breads and cakes come to be?

Bánh mì



Food writer Calvin Trillin wrote that "The *bánh mì* sandwich is really the only good argument for colonialism."[1] The origins of *bánh mì* are, as Trillin implies, inseparable from France's colonisation of Vietnam, which began in 1858. The French imported wheat and opened bakeries to satiate their own tastes, serving bread in the '*casse-croûte*' style alongside ham, cold cuts, pate, cheese and butter. Baked long and thin like the baguettes we know today, the Vietnamese called it *bánh tày*, a 'Western cake' that was an expensive luxury reserved for foreigners and the elite[2], backed by an absurd pseudoscience that suggested the rice-centric diets of Southeast Asia made us more predisposed to subjugation by bread-eating colonisers[3]. As such, the two cuisines remained distinct and enjoyed separately, each by its own constituency.

All this changed during the First World War. The two largest import companies in Indochina (Speidel & Co. and F. Engler & Co.), being German-owned, were seized by the French colonial authorities. At the same time, French soldiers left for the front lines, leaving European ingredients—bread, meat, and cheese—to the Vietnamese masses.

In the years between the First and Second World Wars, bread became increasingly integrated into the Vietnamese diet. *Casse croute* became the Vietnamese *cát-cụt*, and other food items associated with the meal adopted Viet-Franco names still used today. *Beurre* became *bơ* (butter), *fromage—phô mai* (cheese), and *jambon—giăm bông* (ham).



Image: Power Popiah and Bánh Mì, Tampines

During the Second World War, French-inspired '*cát-cụt*' baguettes and cold cuts continued to be sold on Saigon's streets to an increasingly Vietnamese crowd. As anti-French sentiment increased, though, the name *bánh tày* was dropped in favor of *bánh mì*. Butter was also replaced with mayonnaise, a cheaper and more heat-stable ingredient suitable for tropical Vietnam. Allegedly, *Hoà Mã* in Saigon helped popularise the sandwich and transformed it into what it is today; owner Mr Le reduced the baguette size to 20 centimetres to reduce costs, added more vegetables, and stuffed the ingredients into the bread for portability. Classic French fillings were also Vietnamised: locally flavoured *thịt nguội* replaced French-style cold cuts that were impossible to cure in Vietnam's climate, *pâté* was steamed and seasoned with fish sauce and cinnamon, pickled *củ cải* daikon and carrot substituted cornichons, and fresh coriander and chilli added punchy flavours that would have overwhelmed European palates.

What's your favourite *bánh mì*? For me, it's Power Popiah and Bánh Mì, tucked in a wet market in Tampines (near where I live!). As one might expect, they sell popiah and *bánh mì*. Crispy baguette, *pâté*, *chả lụa*, pickled carrot, coriander, chilli—one bite, and it's *Good Morning, Vietnam.*

[1]Calvin Trillin, The New Yorker.
[2]Simon Stanley, "The Sandwich That Ate The World."
[3]Ibid.

Pandesal and ensaymada



On the fourth floor of Lucky Plaza, Inasal Bakery sells Filipino confectionery. Think crispy caramelised *turon* and ube-and-cheese-filled *ensaymada*. But one baked good stands out. The store assistants yell out "*Pandesal! Pandesal!*" These hot, fluffy buns sold in a paper bag are easily their most popular item, and a nostalgic treat for many Filipinos.



Etymologically, these iconic buns translate to "bread of salt". In fact, due to over 300 years of Spanish colonisation, many Filipino breads retain the prefix *pan*. Bread reached the Philippines through Portuguese and Spanish settlers, who, in their quest to convert indigenous people to Catholicism, needed *hostia*, or sacramental bread. In an attempt to recreate the French baguette, the Spanish inadvertently created the first *pandesal*, made with whole wheat flour and baked in open wood-fire ovens. That version still exists today as *pan de suelo*, or floor bread, and is texturally harder than modern *pandesal* but softer than the French baguette.

According to Amy Uy and Jenny Orillos, authors of *Panaderia: Philippine Bread, Biscuit and Bakery Traditions*, *pandesal* originally comprised wheat flour, salt, sugar, water, pork lard, and yeast. Over time, people began using cheaper, low-protein flour which yielded softer buns. As the bread got softer, it also got sweeter. When sugar became cheaper than salt and Filipino taste buds shifted, the modern sweet *pandesal* was born.

Where *pandesal* is somewhat of a Plain Jane, *ensaymada* is its bolder buttery *bread*thren. It descends from the Mallorcan *ensaïmada*, a spiral pastry made with *saïm*—Catalan for pork lard—first recorded in the 17th century. During colonial times, this was the *ensaïmada* people were familiar with. Filipino *ensaymada*, however, has a distinctly different set of ingredients, swathed in buttercream and crowned with grated *quezo de bola* (Edam cheese from the Netherlands), which arrived in the Philippines via Spanish galleons as part of the Manila Galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. Today, it is a distinct, unique bread representing the intertwining colonial and local flavours of the Philippines.

Kue lapis legit

Indonesian *lapis legit*, meaning "rich layers", has minimally 18 layers of batter which are painstakingly grilled one by one. As a child, I would eat Bengawan Solo's *lapis legit* layer by buttery layer. But given the region's history of Dutch colonisation, the origins of *lapis legit* are highly contested.



Image: Inasal Bakery in Lucky Plaza

Dutch *spekkoek*, dubbed "bacon cake" due to its striped pattern, is generally accepted as the origin of *lapis legit*. *Spekkoek* alternates between a vanilla and spiced batter while lapis legit uses a singular spiced batter; one narrative holds that spekkoek was invented by Dutch colonials in Batavia—modern-day Jakarta—who missed their winter *speculaas* spiced biscuits and attempted to recreate its flavour using locally available ingredients. Indonesian bakers in colonial kitchens then adapted the European layered-cake technique with the archipelago's spice profile: cinnamon, cardamom, clove, mace, and anise. These, incidentally, were the spices the Dutch East India Company (VOC) came to Indonesia to monopolise, resulting in the Banda Islands genocide that killed or enslaved over 90 percent of the local population.

Notably, *kue lapis* already existed when lapis legit was supposedly created. The steamed, layered rice cake came from China, made from similar layering techniques. Perhaps then, the only Dutch contributions to the cake were butter and wheat flour (given that the other ingredients were already found locally).



A third origin story points to *bebinca*, a layered pudding cake from Goa, a former Portuguese colony. Comprising egg yolks, coconut milk, flour, and ghee, it possesses 7 to 16 cardamom-and-nutmeg-seasoned layers. Since the Portuguese had colonised parts of the Indonesian archipelago before the Dutch arrived, it is plausible that *bebinca*—or something like it—travelled east along Portuguese trade routes and provided a template for *lapis legit*. Food historian Janet Boileau, however, has argued the reverse: Southeast Asian steamed layer cakes travelled westward to Goa via Melaka, were absorbed into Goan Catholic confectionery, and returned as *bebinca*.

So which story is really true? Perhaps that question itself misses the point. *Lapis legit* is fittingly layered in its history, originating from the intricately entangled realities of colonialism. The cake we know today was shaped by an indeterminate number of cooks and bakers through experimentation and the exchange of ideas. What matters is not the true inventor of *lapis legit*, but the need to appreciate this delicious creation for its uniqueness.



Bebinca

Bready for more?

I've had the privilege of tasting these unique breads and hybrid pastries here in Singapore. These creations, part of everyday life, bear invisible traces of history. Now it's your turn—when you consider the typical Singaporean bakery, what other influences can you see?







What Breads My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why





What breads my lips have kissed, and where, and why
you still remember—what tastes haunt your tongue?
Only memory; how crumbs of chicken pie clung
to school-shirt buttons, or communion wafer dry

from prayer and penance, or an after-church waffle buy,
peanut butter melting and then you are young
again, holding your mother's hand as song
after song plays, worshipping sweet goodbye

to the big answers. Watching bread mould
bloom in green and white, somewhere-bound
you go, the mind turning about his truth

or lack, and a ziploc bag can hold
only what you give it—the sound
of school is clear, cruel suffice of youth.



Author's Note

Loosely inspired by Edna St. Vincent Millay's famous Sonnet XLIII, this poem is a love letter to the breads of my childhood. By invoking these memories, I hope to express nostalgia, faith, and maturation.



PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

CONTENT WARNING: This article briefly mentions addiction and suicidal ideation. If you're experiencing struggles with mental health, please remember that you are not alone. Help can be sought at the following helplines:

- Samaritans of Singapore (24/7): Call 1767 or WhatsApp +65 9151 1767
- IMH Mental Health Hotline (24/7): Call +65 6339 2222
- National Mindline (24/7): Call 1771 or WhatsApp +65 6669 1771
- NUS: Call +65 6516 2376 or email ucs@nus.edu.sg

*Names have been changed for anonymity.

Adolescence is *messy*.

It's the time of life when you first become aware of your periphery, the heavy gaze of the *other*, and all expectations that come with it. When defying the mainstream is tantamount to social suicide (at least, in certain social groups), you're forced to conform and fashion yourself around the prevailing norms associated with a family-first, society-first nation, shaped into a composite of pre-defined social units: the picture-perfect sister, son, parent, patriot. It feels like you—an awkward, fumbling teenager, just beginning to reckon with your place in the world—have been straight-jacketed into convention: "practical" degrees, "respectable" career paths, "acceptable" familial structures.

Yeah, adolescence isn't just messy. It's *hellish*.

But the teenage spirit of loud, unabashed self-expression is indomitable, and it's here that the long-bemoaned, subject-of-parental-alarm Internet presents its appeal. An expanse that lets you fawn over the latest Silent Hill release with your 15-year-old online friend from Chile, or introduces you to that niche, electronic German band from the 1970s—it's a space that *thrives* on individuality, catering to every imaginable community. For a teenager idling around within the rigid confines of their room? That's a goldmine.

Aspirations? They'll rip them to shreds.

It's no secret that the arts and humanities are often derided in the "real" world, a passion often frowned upon for a whole host of reasons, be it their seeming impracticality for career development or downright "strange" avant-garde nature.

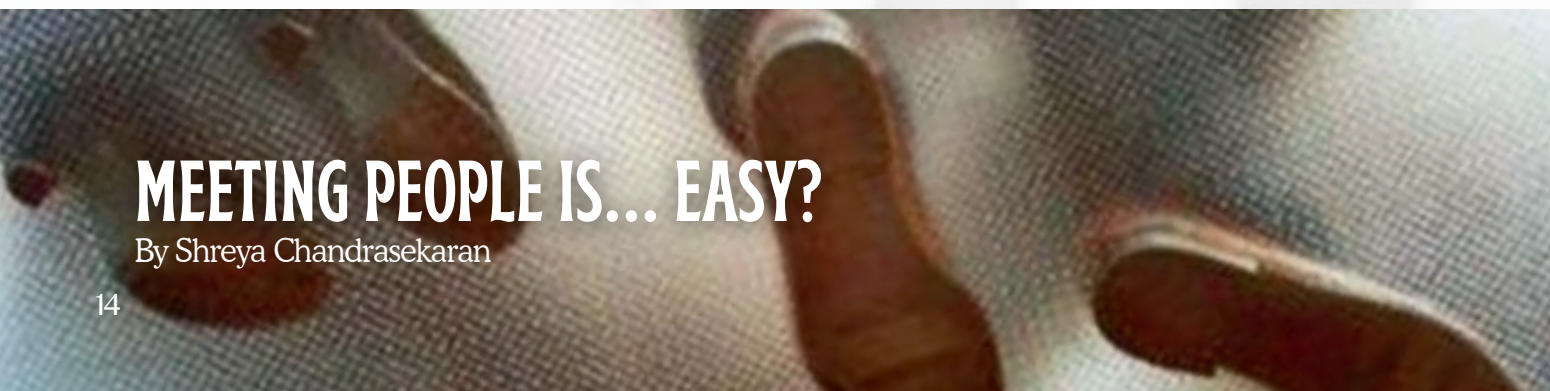
The Internet's fandom spaces, however, offer safe spaces for people to nerd out over passions marginalised in real life and ward off any undue alienation they face.

Twenty-year-old *tknjz** first developed an appetite for history when they read iconic Tumblr "sh*tposts" anchored in the context of the *Hamilton* musical. As they aged, it was the vast array of revelatory *Hamilton* memes available online, drawing from and satirising the musical's historical figures, which had inspired them to localise their sh*tposts based on the historical figures of Singapore: Raffles and Farquhar. This "very fun way of engaging with History" (that requires more extensive research than some might realise) was exactly what strengthened *tkjnz's* passion for the subject, leading them to formally study it in university a whopping seven years later.

We're the kids who feel like dead ends

The Internet, incidentally, was ahead of the curve in matters of mental health care, offering teenagers a space to carve out found families when real-world supplies ran dry.

It took twenty-year-old Patricia one afternoon of listening to *The Black Parade* for them to slide headfirst into the musical genre of pop-punk. The lyrical sensibilities of *My Chemical Romance* and *Fall Out Boy* made them feel *seen* for the first time. Trifling through scanned digital archives of past interviews and taking in words that made concrete the lyricists' battles with mental health—paralleled in their songs—was a vital catharsis for their own teenage angst.



MEETING PEOPLE IS... EASY?

By Shreya Chandrasekaran



I myself remember seeking out concert videos uploaded to YouTube in 2006: shaky, unfocused, barely visible at times. There's a strange comfort that arises from watching thousands of bodies in motion, decades away, continents apart, belting out the final refrains of *Famous Last Words*, audibly bleeding the very emotions I'd experienced years later when I first discovered the song. In Patricia's words, it's a euphoric realisation aptly put as, "Huh, they're just like me."

Similarly, twenty-year-old Ciel* almost exclusively sought companionship in online spaces up till the age of eighteen, in pursuit of a much-needed refuge from an overly strict and toxic family environment.

An online friend from Indonesia, in particular, unfailingly remained by his side—staying on call 24/7 to fend off Ciel's hatred of being alone, and offering to fly him to his own hometown when suicidal ideation grew too heavy.

When Ciel was forced to abandon all web-based connections after visiting mental health professionals, he'd soon received a letter in the mail: a poem of solace penned by this very friend. It remains a poem that Ciel treasures to this day.

Girls who are boys who like boys to be girls...

Of all the identity markers you have, gender and sexuality are unfailingly subject to ruthless scrutiny. Because of how *visible* your body and behaviour are to others, it seems as though you owe the world performances of the hyper-specific heteronormative constructs deemed as "convention". Any deviations are an act of betrayal, making you irredeemable in the eyes of those around you. The coveted secrecy the Internet offers, in comparison, makes for a safe haven; anonymity leaves you unburdened by external expectations, your identity being no one else's to claim but yours.

You have all the space you need to enter rabbit holes of Wikipedia pages detailing identities you'd never heard before, soak in the wisdom of Carrds[1] crafted intricately by "Elder Queers", and engage with communities that might not yet be readily accessible to you.

For Ben*, the Internet felt like a trial run of discovering his gender, sexuality, and personality before he could finally communicate it to others. It offered him a space to try on different skins, feel how they settled against his bones, and discover ones akin to comfort and security. "If not for that trial run, I don't think I'd have realised this version of myself," Ben quips, recounting his transition from identifying as a butch lesbian in his early teenage years to his coming out as a bisexual, transgender man.

Before coming out, it was only in online spaces that he could unabashedly be his "real" self and have it affirmed by like-minded people with an unspoken understanding of the teenage queer experience. Ciel, too, recalls an instance of a friend seamlessly referring to him with different pronouns upon request. He hadn't realised how easily acceptance could come till then, and he owes it to them for "accelerating" the rate at which he'd discovered his identity.

Worst day of your life, first day of yourself

It might be easy to dismiss these teenage anxieties on the grounds that they've found neither the right people nor the right spaces yet, but teenagers crucially lack the agency or resources to do so in the "real" world. The pressure to fit into the few physical spaces they inhabit or risk long-lasting rumours and tarnished first impressions is immense. Try keeping up a facade for years; it gets *exhausting*.

It's precisely why the Internet is a cornerstone of many coming-of-age journeys: you become a small, nearly unidentifiable fish in a big pond. No one knows you, much less expects anything of you. Presented with countless chances to start anew, you're granted every opportunity to try, fail, and persevere in reinventing yourself.

Years later, you might find yourself cringing at your teenage self's online presence, "ragging on [your] past self," as Ben puts it. Nonetheless, hints of fondness seep through: "It feels like an old home I moved out of, a childhood home of sorts."

Hindsight might imbue us with innumerable regrets, but our teenage selves did their best given their circumstances. Growing up is never easy, and it never *will* be, so be kind to yourself. The next time you stumble across a teenager with a nervous stance and unsteady gaze reminiscent of your own past, extend that same grace to them.

[1] Carrd is a versatile web platform often used by individuals—in this context—to create succinct, informative online brochures about any imaginable topic.

Proof of Life

Gerin Lim

Dear (stupid) A,
I told you it wouldn't work. I told you. Now we can't see or meet or even talk to each other for A YEAR, because you're banished to our grandparents' lair where cell service doesn't exist. I had to bribe our least favourite cousin to secretly give you this letter when they visit, so be nice, okay? Try to get on our grandparents' good side so you can come back sooner. But DON'T let them find out about this letter, or they'll tell Mum & Dad. Then I'LL get in trouble. And make sure you write down your address in your reply! I'll put ours at the end of this letter, so post it there. (You do get mail out there, right?)
Love, Z

Hi Z Y.
Shut up. I said I was sorry a million times. It would have totally worked if you-know-who didn't snitch. It's their fault our parents hate me now and I'm stuck in this boring place with only animals and chores. At least I don't have to go to the stupid classes you like so much. And the food is good, especially Gran's desserts.
I'm trying to be a goody-two-shoes like you, but I'm not sure it's working. They don't seem to care what I do as long as I finish my chores. I don't think they'd care even if they knew we were sending each other letters. (Not that I've told them. I know, it's SECRET.) Speaking of, we should use codenames to make it extra secret, like the spies in your history books!! I'll be agent Bakery Prisoner. Because, you know.
Signed, Agent Bakery Prisoner

Dear clueless chicken,
First of all, your handwriting is so atrocious that the mailman almost delivered it to the wrong address. Luckily, I intercepted him on the way to my new class on Saturday morning, when Mum & Dad were too busy to notice. They're still mad at you for ruining their important business deal, so keep sending it to that same address and I'll secretly intercept it. Secondly, these classes aren't that fun for me either. I'd rather hang out with you. This new class is especially boring, but going makes Mum & Dad happy. They might lift your banishment earlier if they're happier, so I'm doing it for us, you clueless chicken. Thirdly, we should change our codenames to something less obvious. Everyone knows our grandparents own a bakery. And adults always snoop even when they act like they don't care, so make sure to hide these somewhere no one can find it. (NOT under your bed.)
Exasperatedly, Xylose

To: Waffler
Duh. I'm not that stupid. And I've been very good the last few months, helping out EVERYWHERE even when I don't have to. Helping out in the bakery is more fun than I thought it'd be. Gramps and Gran don't talk much, but they don't pry, and Gran makes my favourite desserts every day, so they probably like me. At this rate, I'll be back before this month is over!!
From: Agent Doughnut

Dear Elephant Ears,
Something's up. After your last letter, Mum & Dad took days off work. I even got time off my classes (which never happens). They seemed happier after I won that national competition, so I thought you could finally come back earlier. But when I asked them about you, they got really angry. I'm so confused. Have you heard anything from our grandparents? ···I miss you. It's so dull without your chaos, and Mum & Dad have gotten stricter lately. You're going to hate our new schedule. I'm so busy that I can only write to you when they think I'm asleep. But at least we're halfway there. Maybe you could bring some of Grandmother's desserts? I'd like to try them too.
Love, Volatilization

Don't worry Upside-down Cake
I'm sure it's just 'adult things' again. Gramps & Gran haven't said anything. Well, usually only Gran talks, but she didn't reply when I asked when I'd be going home. It's not fair that adults always want us to do what we're told, but never tell us anything we want to know.
Also, congrats on winning! (Though it seems like you got punished instead.) Let's celebrate for real when I get back! I'll bring a huge bag of everything in the bakery, plus some stuff I baked myself. I miss you too, but in three months! We'll be!! Together again!!!
Totally unworried Agent Fritters

Dear G,
I think we should stop sending letters for now. Mum's monitoring me really closely, always 'checking in' to make sure I'm studying or preparing for another competition. I've been so tired trying to juggle everything that she almost caught me. Hide your letters well. Until I send you another letter, don't—

Dear Pudding,
Did something happen? You haven't replied in ages, and I was supposed to go home a month ago, but no one's come to get me. I've been really good this whole time, I swear. My grades are better, I have (actual human!) friends now, and I bake so well. Gran even gives me extra allowance. Mum & dad can't still be mad, right? If they are, I'll make it up to them, no matter what it takes. As long as I can come home...
Kinda worried, Kuchen
[RETURNED TO SENDER]

Dear Ganache,
I'm sorry I haven't written in so long. You probably know from Mum's letter, but everything's been so hectic after moving here and skipping several grades
[ ] new school. Also, Mum's been touchy ever since she caught us. I had to [ ] and win another national competition before she'd let me write [ ] again. It's difficult keeping up with schoolwork and
[ ] but··· Anyway, how are you? I wish you'd come with us, but since [ ] decided to stay there instead—

Dear Cliebol,
You're not dead, are you? Don't be mad, but... I told Gramps & Gran. They weren't angry. Gran said they don't really keep in touch with our parents...
I must have messed up even worse than we thought for them to have sent me here. I don't know how to apologise if I can't talk to them.
I wish you were here. You'd know what to do.
Really worried, Lekach
[UNDELIVERED]

[Dear] Jalousie,
[ ] . I can't believe we've been separated for years now. It's··· lonely, knowing you're living so happily far away that you haven't found time to write me. I'm glad for you, but··· [ ] Honestly, I wish I could join you there. What's the point of [ ] anyway? Everyone at school's either too intimidated or jealous [ ] Mother & Father talk, but only ever about my [ ] Sometimes I can't remember what I liked before [ ] weeks of endless studying about things I don't care [ ] just to [ ] you, but you don't even
Anyway, I don't have time to write letters—

Dear N,
I don't know why I'm even writing this letter. I finally made it back after years, but... You're not here. Mum & dad aren't here. Even the people I've been posting letters to aren't here. And why is our house for sale?
Where are you? I asked our neighbours, but no one knows anything except that you suddenly moved out one day...
Did you really leave me behind? ...No, you wouldn't. Not without telling me. It was our parents, wasn't it? They always said I was too much to handle.
I know you won't forget me. We literally have the same face. So... I'll keep searching. No matter what... we'll find each other.

[Dear Z------,
Congratulations on your early acceptance into our university...

[NOT AT THIS ADDRESS PLEASE RETURN TO SENDER]



CUSTOM PREORDER SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

Dear Agent Fritters,

It's you, isn't it?

You must hate me for not writing to you sooner, for abandoning you without even a reply years ago, but please give me a chance to explain.

First of all, I'm sorry for not reaching out sooner. Well, I did, actually. I wrote hundreds of letters over the years, whenever I missed you. I didn't know you never received any of them. I thought you never replied because you were busy with your new life, and I just wasn't as important to you anymore. Turns out Mother was burning them secretly., all the while encouraging me to keep writing to you. I should have known something was off... she was furious known it was too good to be true, especially since she was furious after catching me writing to you years ago... but I didn't want to doubt my our parents. I didn't want to believe that they would do that to you, to us. But because I was afraid of being disappointed by those I relied on, you were hurt for so long. I won't make any excuses. What we did to you was wrong. There's nothing I can say to express how truly sorry I am.

Secondly... our parents are gone. Last week, they... It was a typical car accident. I thought you might If you want. It's been overwhelming, dealing with... everything. After. I'm not... I don't know what I'm doing. All this time, I just did whatever they told me to, hoping that they would let us meet again. I know it's pathetic, but without them watching over my shoulder, I'm... lost. I just... Could we meet? Whenever you're free. I'll make it up to you, no matter what it takes. I just... want to see you again.

Sincerely, Upside-down Cake

Z,
We've got a lot to talk about. But no more letters.
I live at ----------. Now shut up, stupid, and come home.
Love, A

Author's note:

Every slice of bread acts as the physical, post-mortem proof that billions of tiny yeast microorganisms once lived. As the catalyst in the proofing process, yeast determines the dough's potential to overcome their final 'trial by fire' (being baked in an oven), before it itself is immolated. In this story, the proofing process begins with the twins' separation, with parental attention/control metaphorically representing yeast. The twins fight off estrangement through letters that double as proof of the other's life, referencing evidence that kidnap victims still live as hostages, though this proof is eventually falsified and discarded by their parents.

Over time, the twin who receives all the parental attention struggles to meet their parents' demands, eventually burning out and collapsing after their parents' death like overproofed dough collapsing under the heat of the oven. Meanwhile, the neglected twin works their way from the countryside to start a bakery in the city, like underproofed dough gradually rising to become bread with a stronger structure. Thus, this piece highlights how like breads which require different amounts of yeast for optimal baking, that different people thrive optimally in different conditions.

By: Isabel

From Girlboss to "Just a Girl": The Regression of Online Femininity

Scrolling through TikTok, it's hard to miss how often "I'm just a girl" shows up—usually attached to something mildly inconvenient, vaguely self-deprecating, and played for laughs. On the surface, it's harmless. But the phrase sits within a much longer history of gendered language that frames what women can and cannot be.

If you think about it (and I have, perhaps too much), positioning yourself as "just" a girl subtly lowers expectations. The qualifier "just" softens the statement, but also shrinks it, turning "girl" into something smaller, less capable, and easier to excuse. Repeated over time, ironically or not, that framing risks becoming normalised.[1]

Some online trends that begin as playful or ironic can gradually echo archaic ideas about gender roles—particularly when they centre domesticity, simplicity, or traditional aesthetics. The effect isn't always intentional, but it is still worth examining. This phenomenon, often termed "re-traditionalisation," suggests that digital spaces can inadvertently revive conservative gender norms under the guise of irony[2].

Before this starts sounding like a conspiracy theory, it helps to look at where some of these ideas gained traction.



Girl as a Linguistic Modifier

Historically, the term has carried different connotations. "Girl Power" in the 1990s signalled empowerment, while "Girlboss" in the 2010s attempted to align feminism with corporate ambition[3]. More recently, phrases like "Hot Girl Summer" helped normalise the casual use of "girl" as a flexible cultural label.

Today, terms like "Girl Dinner," "Girl Math," and "Girl Job" are used to frame everyday behaviours with a layer of irony or relatability. Commentators have noted that these phrases often function less as empowerment and more as self-aware humour, reflecting a shift in how femininity is performed online, from an attempt at reclaiming gender equality to a humorous diminishing of our gender.

"Girl Dinner," for instance, began as a joke about assembling low-effort meals but has also been criticised for potentially normalising disordered eating habits[4]. "Girl Math" plays on intentionally flawed financial logic for comedic effect, though it echoes long-standing stereotypes about women and money. "Girlboss," once aspirational, has since become shorthand for performative or unsustainable productivity[5].

Across these examples, "girl" operates as a framing device that can trivialise, soften, or recontextualise mundane behaviours in a specifically gendered, often self-deprecating way.

When applied broadly—"Girl Hobby," "Girl Walk," "Girl Job"—the term becomes reductive, diminishing ordinary activities into something more palatable. While I don't think it's often in an attempt to appease men (in a pick-me manner), they still indirectly reinforce patriarchal standards by lowering women. "Woman," by contrast, carries expectations of competence and responsibility, while "girl" suggests something lighter, less serious, and easier to opt in and out of.



[1] Robin Tolmach Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[2] Lisa Adkins, Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

[3] Sarah Banet-Weiser, Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[4] Emily J. H. Contois, Diners, Dudes, and Diets: How Gender and Power Collide in Food Media and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

[5] Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).

Lockdown's New Lifestyle: The Rise of Digital Domesticity

During COVID-19 lockdowns, social media usage surged, with platforms like TikTok seeing significant growth as people spent more time at home. Content centred around baking, gardening, and slow lifestyles also gained popularity, offering a sense of routine and control during a period of uncertainty[6].

The rise of Ballerina Farm (Hannah Neeleman) provided a particular version of that comfort. Baking from scratch and presenting a calm, rural lifestyle felt like an antidote to the increasingly exhausting "girlboss" narrative of productivity and hustle. Neeleman, a Juilliard-trained ballerina with nine children, does not explicitly identify with the "trad-wife" label, but her content often aligns with its aesthetics. By remaining largely apolitical, her platform maintains broad appeal, framing this lifestyle as personal preference rather than ideology.

In 2023, similar content gained further visibility with creators like Nara Smith, whose highly stylised videos (such as making bubblegum from scratch) blur the line between domestic labour and performance. While not overtly political, these aesthetics still communicate values, shaping how audiences interpret ideas of work, femininity, and choice. This "aestheticisation of labor" also often obscures the economic privilege required to maintain such a lifestyle[7]. These women are able to perform domestic labour in a way that is simply unattainable for the masses, where the messiness of life obstructs the image influencers try to portray, and where unaesthetic domestic labour often goes unnoticed.

The Illusion of Subversion

The idea that this genre of content is entirely apolitical becomes harder to sustain when looking at specific moments of public reaction, like the widely discussed "egg apron" incident.

In a profile of Neeleman by People's Magazine, she mentioned hoping for a trip to Greece for her birthday, but instead received an apron designed for collecting eggs. This detail quickly circulated online, sparking debate. Some viewers saw it as a thoughtful gift aligned with her lifestyle, while others interpreted it as reductive.

Because Neeleman herself did not publicly frame the incident as negative, its meaning remains ambiguous. Rather than definitive evidence of anything, it functions more as a flashpoint, revealing how audiences project broader concerns about gender roles onto curated content.

This is where the idea of "choice" becomes more complex. When influencers present their lives through a series of aesthetic decisions like baking bread, homeschooling, or dressing modestly, it can obscure the broader conditions that make those choices possible. Some critics argue that such portrayals downplay the labour, privilege, or constraints involved, while others view them as valid expressions of personal preference.

At the same time, it is difficult to assess agencies from the outside. Neeleman's content often presents her as an active and willing participant, which complicates any claim that her lifestyle is purely imposed. What remains clear, however, is that the framing of these choices plays a significant role in how they are understood by audiences.

[6] Sarah Projansky, Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

[7] Stéphanie Genz, Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Homesteading as just a Girl

This is where the sourdough meets the "I'm just a girl" audio. Homesteading gave the "girl" prefix a physical location—the kitchen—where "Girl Math" and "Girl Dinner" could live. At its core, the homesteading movement seems to be a fantasy of disempowerment. It's about being taken care of, living in a protected bubble, and focusing on the tactile, simple world of the nursery.

By labeling our lives with "girl," we are digitally homesteading. We are retreating into a version of femininity that is purposefully small, manageable, and unthreatening. The "Girl" prefix is the linguistic version of the Egg Apron. It's a gift we give ourselves to feel "cute" while we simultaneously surrender our status as competent, functioning adults.

Societal Double Standards

Sadly, that's just the environment today. When boys joke about being a "stay-at-home boyfriend" or getting "beat up by their girl," it's funny because it contradicts the power he actually possesses in the real world.

But when girls lean into the "I'm just a girl" bit or the "I wish I was a 1950s housewife" aesthetic, it's not subversive. It's reinforcing centuries of infantilisation and misogyny that we're still desperately trying to lacerate[9]. We are cosplaying as the people our grandmothers fought and bled so that we wouldn't have to be.

From Girlboss to Girl's loss

The takeaway here isn't that you should throw away your sourdough starter or stop wearing pink. It's that we need to be incredibly wary of any trend that asks us to play "small" for a laugh. Whether it's an "apolitical" influencer showing you her nine kids or a TikTok filter that makes you feel cute for not knowing how to change a tire, the goal is the same: to make the loss of autonomy feel like a lifestyle choice.

"Just a girl" isn't a joke; it's a white flag.
And I personally think we should stop waving it.

[8] Angela McRobbie, The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change (London: SAGE Publications, 2009).

[9] Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963).

DIGITAL PARASITES

>>> GARY AXEL MULIYONO

About eight years ago, I entered a room that I didn't know was special.

The memory was hazy. At the time, I probably would've felt some sense of awe at the start: of an array of bulky, sleek-black desktop computers tightly packed in a room clearly not made for its purpose. As someone who grew up with nothing but an unnaturally bulky LG laptop, any desktop was bound to impress me, but still. To this day, few school memories of mine have escaped a death cruelly employed by time, and this was a stranger one out of the bunch. Perhaps why it has stuck out to me all these years can be made clearer by the fact that once I sat down in front of that screen, all I saw was an interface so horrific, I could only ask why someone had chosen it at all.



That was the consensus amongst me and my classmates at the time, when the teacher eventually brutalized the fact that we were running none other than Ubuntu - a Linux-based operating system few of us knew of at the time. Granted, we were 14-year-olds, but I would probably make the same conclusion if I were to judge an 2018 version of Ubuntu today. Even just minutes upon introduction, we were all groaning a familiar sigh. A UI from 2007, a perplexing start menu, a sub-par suite of office apps, and a general lack of basic functionality were complaints we all probably had (and ones that certainly didn't go away as time went on). The choice of Ubuntu was so peculiarly horrible that it had become part of our collective 'lore' for our then-admonished computer class tutor: a failed, arrogant hipster who 4 had wasted his life chasing useless degrees in every field he could get a hold of, just to land a job as a schoolteacher (the latter part of which, was apparently somewhat true). The choice was thus an emblem of his pathetic, pompous stubbornness - an affliction we could not share sympathy with at the time.

I was one of these disaffected users, 'broken' by the long-awaited removal of popular ad blocker UBlock Origin for Google Chrome. Having been the backbone of making my browsing experience tolerable for the past half-decade, it was non-trivially frustrating to have it removed one day, all due to an end-of-support deadline. Not wanting to be bothered with a lesser version or a complicated workaround, I just decided to switch to Firefox, and it all went awry from there. While far from being a proper "little" guy, Mozilla was a far smaller evil to Google, and I figured that was more than enough.

GOOGLE. MOZILLA. UBLOCK ORIGIN. MICROSOFT WINDOWS. GOOGLE. MOZILLA. UBLOCK ORIGIN. MI



Soon, it wasn't just Firefox.
Google had become a pain point too,
with their 15GB data limit that constantly
perturbed me on every site I perused. Soon,
I was won over by the 'deGooglers',and I began switching
to alternatives like Proton, despite their clear inferiority as a service.
Slowly but surely, each tool I had transfigured into its worse,
more annoying cousin. Finally, Microsoft reached its limit
too. I finally tried and switched to Ubuntu,
an operating system hat very much still has
its flaws but is, at the very least, not Windows 11.
It wasn't long tillI was used to that same old
outdated interface from 2018,
and wasn't much longer till
I started loving it.

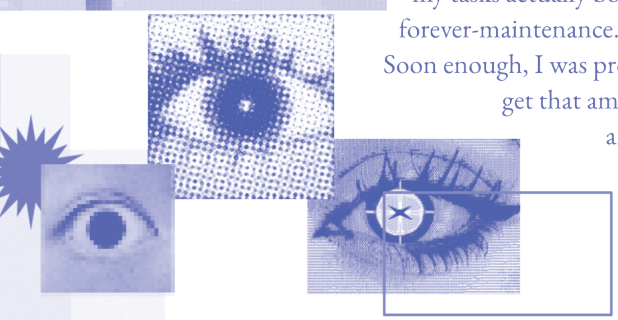






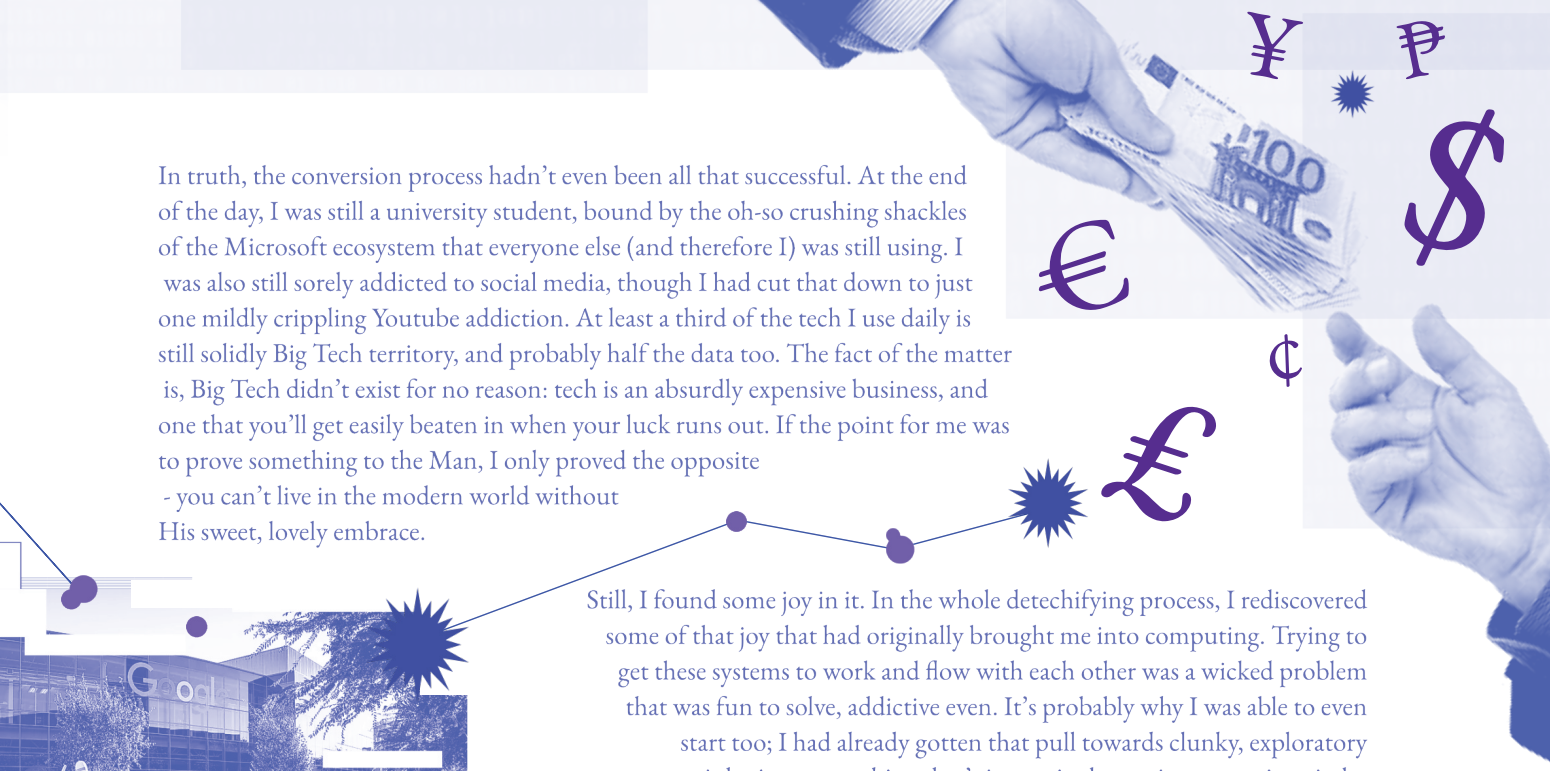
Nowadays, my life is a jumbled mess
of subpar, semi-functional technologies. Instead
of logging into Windows with a passkey and accessing OneDrive,
or opening Chrome to access Google Docs, I log into Ubuntu with an annoyingly
long password, open a beautiful but power-sucking tab of Zen, and use a terminal
command just to activate a VPN. Then I would open Obsidian to take notes,
making sure to trigger a manual sync command powered by an open-source extension so that
my tasks actually bother to sync to my phone. Every app needed setting up, every app needed
forever-maintenance. Everything was fresh and customizable, but also clunky and incomplete.
Soon enough, I was probably two dozen hours into the whole process. Once in a while, I'll even
get that amazing moment of crystalline red where everything simultaneously breaks,
and you wonder why you even bothered in the first place. Yet I persevered,
as I kept forgiving flaws time and time again by the sheer fact that yes,
I was doing all this to not surrender to Big Tech.

All of this must have meant something, right?



Today, I think I've become the man we all once hated.
Well, maybe we all have. The counterculture against Big Tech
wasn't always popular, but it had always existed in its roots. The
hopeful, cooperative but often-naive ideals that had built our techworld's
foundations have silently persevered in niche corners, and so it's almost natural
for it to re-emerge as a social force today. Driven both by dissatisfaction
over popular options, as well as a lack of choice in a heavily oligopolistic
industry, the 'little guy' option today might seem all but sensible to a
hefty few. Today, entire communities dedicated to these alternatives
seem to be thriving; disparate yet ideologically united against those
that have dissatisfied them, and for good reason. Nowadays, there are
many breaking points to choose from: data privacy concerns, the
recent AI craze, or just plain-old end-of-support for certain
systems. If you wanted to find a good reason to log off,
you probably just had to wait.

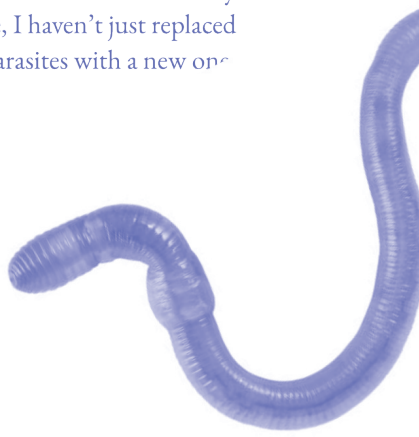




In truth, the conversion process hadn't even been all that successful. At the end of the day, I was still a university student, bound by the oh-so crushing shackles of the Microsoft ecosystem that everyone else (and therefore I) was still using. I was also still sorely addicted to social media, though I had cut that down to just one mildly crippling Youtube addiction. At least a third of the tech I use daily is still solidly Big Tech territory, and probably half the data too. The fact of the matter is, Big Tech didn't exist for no reason: tech is an absurdly expensive business, and one that you'll get easily beaten in when your luck runs out. If the point for me was to prove something to the Man, I only proved the opposite - you can't live in the modern world without His sweet, lovely embrace.



Still, I found some joy in it. In the whole detechifying process, I rediscovered some of that joy that had originally brought me into computing. Trying to get these systems to work and flow with each other was a wicked problem that was fun to solve, addictive even. It's probably why I was able to even start too; I had already gotten that pull towards clunky, exploratory tinkering - something that's increasingly rare in computing circles nowadays. I guess that's why tech retroism is also popular these days, with the manual tinkering of film cameras, flip phones that seem to have captured the cultural zeitgeist. I just got to experience that fad in my own way, and one I hope can turn into something my subconscious won't immediately deride by calling it one. I'm crossing my fingers that, maybe, I haven't just replaced some parasites with a new on



I am certainly under no illusion that what I did was simple: it was an advanced, time-consuming process that the vast majority of users should never learn in their entire lives. This wasn't, and hopefully still isn't a sales pitch to go de-tech your life. But that's also the point: no one should. These options were underground and forgotten for a reason - they were bad options that never bothered to keep up with trends or were just plainly inadequate. Yet today, throngs of people online: classical techies, libertarians, anarchists, paranoid conspiricists, fascists, and normies alike fill up forums about the de-techification process, whether it be booting Ubuntu on an old Thinkpad, quitting Google and hosting their own file server, getting an e-ink reader to replace their phone, or even just quitting social media. Despite objectively better options ruling the industry, a combination of zealous, gleeful contrarianism and a genuine frustration over the typical has created an undeniable movement perhaps too large to ignore any longer. While still tiny, its persistence and recent rise will hopefully preserve those better, lost ideals of the tech industry. And just like a lot of other things, they'll hopefully come back.





UBLOCK ORIGIN, MICROSOFT, UBUNTU, WINDOW



Something's Brewing: The New Communal Kitchen

By Zander

As the pantry door swings open, a myriad of aromas perfume the air—sweet, sour, and astringent. Bottles line the back wall, each filled with a bubbling amber liquid beckoning you forward. Someone brushes past your shoulder and lifts a damp towel from a metal bowl, revealing a giant mass of soft, pillowy dough. In a swift motion, they transfer the dough into a greased loaf pan and slide it into the oven, turning to you with a smile as they wipe the sweat off their brow. Welcome to the communal kitchen.

The School of Fermentation

Food was in short supply (and easily perishable) for most of human history. Enter fermentation: a process through which food can be made longer lasting, more nourishing, and better tasting. Fermentation is simple in theory—think of it as a form of microbial digestion. Microbes like yeast, Saccharomyces cerevisiae, "eat" sugars in an oxygen-deprived environment and create "waste" materials like acids, alcohol, carbon dioxide, and hydrogen gas. It's a natural process, but if uncontrolled, can produce nasty off-flavours or microbial toxins threatening human health.

Little has changed about the biochemistry underpinning fermentation since its discovery millennia ago. Yet, today, novel flavours and exciting compounds continue to be extracted from various grains and fruit. Ezann, for example, laboured hard in her food science laboratory to tend to her group's cultures, aiming to maximise their odds of creating a successful, delicious product (that might also net them good grades).

"We had to taste test everything for our lab report, and while the wine turned out well, our sauerkraut tasted a little funky. We later realised that was because spoilage bacteria had grown in it," she laughed.

Likewise, Astaria*, a second-year Chemical Engineering student, was tasked with making an appetising high-ethanol, low-sugar kombucha in her major's introductory course. Given the challenge in meeting these requirements, she was stressed. "But the process was fun! We thought our kombucha might be too concentrated, but it turned out great after testing. " The group heaved a major sigh of relief knowing their prayers had been answered. "We didn't taste it though. The lab equipment... it's not really food-safe."

[1]Fayyaz, Khadijah et al. 2022. "Microbial Toxins in Fermented Foods: Health Implications and Analytical Techniques for Detection." Journal of Food and Drug Analysis 30 (4): 523–37.

On the contrary, Ezann's coursemates reaped the fruits of their labour at the end of the semester, coming together to enjoy each other's hairy tofu, bread, kombucha, and yoghurt projects in class. While she loved these lab experiments, she wouldn't repeat the experience at home. "You have to be really patient to see any results."



A Microbial Community

Some youths do not shy away from this labour, however. The COVID-era trend of baking [2] and homebrewing[3] on social media has yet to die out even today, leading many curious youths to begin their own fermentation journeys. Take Adam, a third-year NUS student, for example. Coming across Golden Hive Mead on Instagram was exactly what led him down the rabbit hole of making honey wine.

"You put in about three hours of actual work, then set it aside for a few weeks to ferment and age. I do have to wait some time before I can enjoy the drink, but it's cheaper than purchasing it outside," Adam said, noting how bringing his mead to a chalet some months later led to easy conversation with his CCAmates. "Each batch is a few litres in volume, so there's no way I can finish it on my own. I might as well introduce my friends to something new."

Lauren, a first-year NTU student, also sought out a new hobby to fill her spare time. While her first attempt failed (as expected), she found the experience fun. "It felt like I was playing because I was just experimenting," she said, recalling how she referenced COVID-era videos to tailor the sourdough-making process to Singapore's warm, humid climate. "It was especially fun to develop a starter because it felt like I had created a 'pet' bread."

She relied heavily on YouTube channels like The Bread Code to refine her bread-making capabilities, slowly gaining confidence in her breads. Now, she brings a loaf to social gatherings whenever she can. "I like making bread for other people—it's an opportunity to contribute something with a personal touch," she asserts. She even hosts workshops with her friends to teach them how to prepare a sourdough starter from scratch and create a loaf with a light, airy crumb. "I've been thinking about using these workshops as a matchmaking service for my friends. Wouldn't that make for a great meet-cute story?"

A Yeasty Third Space

Zymurgy Guild—Singapore's only university-level interest group for fermentation enthusiasts—likewise hosts workshops for NTU students to learn about fermentation. Former ExCo members Julius and Zheng Xuan were initially drawn to the club due to its novelty—bonus points that the club connected their passions for chemistry and food. Being Chemistry majors, they made sure to emphasise the science behind fermentation during their kimchi, cider, and mead workshops.

"Most participants and new members don't know anything about fermentation when they first join our events. That's why we have to step in to teach them what materials to use, what compounds to avoid... It's especially important because we consume the products after," Zheng Xuan explained.



[2] Pasanen, Melissa. 2020. "How The Pandemic Propelled King Arthur Flour | Spotlight." Seven Days.

[3] Selsky, Andrew. 2020. "Amid pandemic, homebrewing surges in popularity." The Seattle Times.

"We even host an annual beer competition where small groups compete with each other to impress professors and industrial judges. I remember yapping with friends to pass the time because of how long beer takes to cook," Julius added.

Unlike NTU, NUS does not allow for alcohol consumption on campus except for at designated campus F&B outlets or at official University events where alcohol is served. Even so, Julius explains that they take alcohol consumption seriously. "We have to treat this privilege with respect and tact. Our professors understand our club actually makes student life more exciting, and they actually love to brag about us to professors at other institutes of higher learning." The club also follows stringent protocols to ensure participants abide by Singapore's homebrewing laws—as outlined in the Customs Act [4], all homebrewers must be 18+ and manufacture a maximum of 30L of beer and 30L of other fermented liquors for personal consumption. That is to say, nothing can be for sale.

That poses no problem to the interest group, however, which does not contribute to a student's extracurricular records. Students have flocked to the pantry in droves out of a desire to spend time with each other while testing new flavours. "There's no mandatory club commitment. Some people come by every week, others come by once a semester. Regardless, I think the pantry makes for a good third space for us to unwind from hectic university life," Zheng Xuan described, establishing the pantry as a common ground for seniors to integrate juniors into the club and pass on the torch of knowledge to future generations of students. "It's actually great that there are no points attached to club commitment because then, everyone comes just to have fun."

Clearly, it is not simply the prospect of developing one's fermentation techniques which has allowed Zymurgy Guild to prosper in NTU. Rather, fermentation (as with any other student club) acts as a medium through which a strong student community can be formed. Having garnered the support of both faculty and student body, Zymurgy Guild has grown from its roots as an individual student's research lab to a communal kitchen where students of all backgrounds can come together and enjoy a glass of wine.

Perhaps one day, NUS too could establish a similar club to democratise food science knowledge and technologies. After all, we already have NUS Bakers & Cooks, so why not NUS Fermentation Association? This newly established club could pioneer community events similar to the music festival Supernova, where alcohol is already served, for social mixing, relaxation, or even sommelier training (as NTU's Wine Society does).
Granted, the club would have to work out many teething issues with NUS' alcohol guidelines. Even so, it may be worth exploring. After all, as today's young Singaporean bakers and brewers have learnt, yeast doesn't only create yummy sourdough bites and honey wines. It also creates community.

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[4] Singapore Customs. "Home brewed beer and other fermented liquors."
www.customs.gov.sg/know-customs/acts-legislation/customs-act/home-brewed-beer-and-other-fermented-liquors.

*Names changed for privacy.



A sourdough rat Lauren baked for a potluck



Students having their beers judged at the SCBE Beer Brewing Competition

forevermore^{tm}

Parvathy
Rajusekhar

1.

On a bright Sunday morning, merely two months into her official dementia diagnosis, the doctor casually suggested letting our great aunt die. "The decision is an immeasurably difficult one. But I urge you to think about the pain she'll experience otherwise." He gave us each a pat on our shoulders to absolve us of our impending guilt before handing out a glossy pamphlet.

We'd all seen the ad before, of course, a grieving family huddling together in black and a tagline plastered across the city's billboards—No one deserves the insurmountable pain of grief. Why deal with loss when you can hold them close, ForevermoreTM?

"Are you suggesting that we replace our beloved aunt with a fake, plastic AI robot?"

The doctor was unfazed at the anger directed his way."I suggest you consider the option before resorting to any sort of verbal violence," he sighed. As if oblivious to the raged atmosphere in the room, he continued, "Look at her. She deteriorates day after day, and soon enough, she'll be reduced to a husk of the vibrant person you once loved. Is this what you truly want your last memories of her to be: a shrivelling, old woman who cannot remember you, let alone love you?" He carried on, absorbed in his own thoughts, "ForevermoreTM isn't meant to replace her in any way. It's simply a tool to help you grieve more healthily and part with her on your own terms."

We glanced at the sleeping figure on the hospital bed, trying to imagine her towering presence reduced to that of a helpless old woman. Great Auntie Maggie was a great many things—a strong-willed matriarch who would constantly remind you that she is one; a woman who was Aunt Maggie to the adults but Gammie to us kids, whose toasty hot chocolate warmed us on wintery nights; someone prone to never-ending sneezing fits at the slightest whiff of moonflowers; a strict guardian but patient caretaker who'd never leave our side no matter how sick we were; a woman who'd slowly begun to forget her keys, her purse, and her clothes before we admitted her to the best hospital in the city. The idea of her in pain, unable to place herself, her surroundings, or her love for us, fell on us like a million pinpricks.

The doctor, content with our lack of agitation (and his admirable pitching skills), turned to leave the room. "Let me know when you're ready and I'll make the arrangements. I promise, the procedure is going to be extraordinarily simple."

***

The package arrived at our doorstep two weeks later. It was a simple cardboard box, blank without any indication of what it might contain. Which, in this case, was just as well.

The instructions were surprisingly straightforward. *Boot the program by logging memories of your loved one. Wait for 48 hours before activating the product. DO NOT TAMPER WITH THE PROGRAM. In case of any emergencies, contact us immediately at wearehereforyou@forevermore.com.*

My eldest cousin, Ani, initially refused to be involved in the final decision. "Have you seen the articles about the company? Do you realise what they're actually doing? They're harvesting our memories against our will!" Unfortunately, Ani was prone to frequent rambling speeches (the dire impacts of war, the necessity of socialism, the unethical practices of Big Oil, to name a few) and was promptly ignored by the rest of the family. Realising his diatribe was getting no attention, he ultimately gave in, contributing to nearly a quarter of the memory requirement (as the eldest grandson, Gammie had always doted on him the most).

"How long do we get to keep her before she's taken away?" my mother had enquired as we'd worked to finalise the documentation earlier. "Take as long as you need," said the company agent with a warm smile. "Who are we to put a deadline on love?"

2.

The new Gammie began her life by yelling for a strong cup of tea, in a manner so reminiscent of our great aunt that we all heaved a sigh of relief. The awkwardness that we'd all anticipated at having a humanoid robot impersonate her seemed unfounded as she took charge of all our lives immediately.

In the beginning, it was eerie to see her fit in so well. The reality of our great aunt buried in her coffin surfaced from time to time, although it did get easier to forget the pain as days went by. She remembered all our favourite dishes, our relationships (past and present), the special gesture she'd saved for each of us and even the secrets we'd confessed as children. In a way, we were back to our lives before her dementia ever materialised.

"Darling," she called to me one day, "can you get me one of those moonflower biscuits from the bakery across the street? It's been quite a while since we've had those," Gammie sighed, as if recalling the delicious memory.

I turned, surprised. "I don't remember ever having those, Gammie. In fact, weren't you against the bakery since they were rumoured to use expired ingredients in their products?" "Nonsense, child. We've had those since you were but a young, meddlesome little thing." She scratched my nose with a frown, her special gesture reserved just for me.

Despite my confusion, I summoned the biscuits. "Take a bite," Gammie insisted with an arm around me. "Tell me if you've honestly forgotten these mouthwatering biscuits."

They were delicious, though I genuinely could not recall tasting them before. But Gammie—upright, righteous, honest Gammie—had no reason to make up a story out of thin air.

The biscuits became a staple at our house from then on, and as I thought over it, later on, she had been right. I did have vague recollections of eating the biscuits as a child, although why I'd had a sudden lapse in memory remained unknown.

Gammie chuckled as I voiced my concern. "It's natural to forget things under spells of high stress."

"I guess you're right. Thank goodness you reminded me."

***

"The stock market isn't for fools and simpletons." Uncle Madhu boasted as he showcased his portfolio to us on a random Wednesday. "To maximise profit, we must always remain one step ahead of the market.

I'm already researching potential companies that may have an uptick soon."

"Why not NSBU? I've heard they've been making quite a few strides recently with their innovations," Gammie quipped from her armchair across the hall.

"Since when are you an expert on stocks, Aunt Maggie?" exclaimed my surprised uncle.

"I'm a woman of many skills, Madhu," Gammie claimed with a wink. "I may be ancient, but I still keep up with the news. Also, I hadn't planned on mentioning this in front of the kids, but weren't you the one moping around last month, regretting your rather mediocre investment choices?"

"How on earth did you learn about that, Aunt Maggie? I had no idea my emotions were that evident."

Gammie laughed. "Don't forget that I've wiped your backside since you were a baby."

"Okay, okay, no need to explain any further. NSBU it is," he blushed as we turned to sneer at him.

3.

"It's a terrible thing, this dementia," my aunt exclaimed. "It takes away their ability to discern what's real and what isn't. My neighbour had always been hale and hearty despite his age. And to see him now, reduced to this..."

"I can't imagine having to deal with something like that," my mother agreed. "Our family has been quite lucky in that regard, at least. No real health scares."

"Don't forget that I'm as old as the man in question, dear," mumbled Gammie. "For all you know, it might just be the end of my time."

As we all rose to a chorus of rousing protests, my uncles decided to take charge and dissipate the negative sentiment. "You would never have to face that, Aunt Maggie, I assure you."

"Can you imagine a world without Gammie in it?" Ani laughed. He'd recently been promoted to a senior ranking position at a top energy company, and he'd claimed it was all due to Gammie's prayers. "We'd all collapse without you."

"I agree, I cannot imagine how we'd function if you weren't here, Aunt Maggie."

"You aren't leaving, right Gammie?" The youngest of our cousins tugged her hands in worry as if expecting her to disappear any second.

"I was only joking, love," Gammie smiled. "Of course I'm not going anywhere."



Content Warning: This is a horror story. Disturbing themes may be present. Reader discretion is advised.

TRYPOPHOBIA

BY TAY KAI LI

The eyes of a lotus are hard to look into.

Yawning voids where flesh should be. Each gaping hole, slightly misshapen. Bulging at the rim, forming pits where seeds should sit. It's the clustering together of not-quite-symmetry that elicits the visceral flinch.

But what's worse? When the many-eyed creature pins you with its relentless watch, daring you to turn? Or when its unnerving gaze is maimed, pupils gouged, scooped out in retaliation, until all that remains is hollowed husk?

Don't look away. Don't look away. Don't look away. Don't look away.

When the Seraph arrives will you turn away?

I won't.

I don't.

Look.

•••

Ma left me a starter.

It's ironic, really. Stirring a starter in the final days of her life. Maybe she wanted to leave something of herself behind. Maybe she wanted a taste of that online trend, a sudden mad impulse to live out an idyllic home-baker fantasy.

Or maybe she just really wanted bread.

Whatever it is, she left it to me like a wayward child and now it sits on my kitchen counter, this jar full of sticky yeast.

She couldn't have had it for long. The label on the front is bright and unpeeling, the ink fresh and unfaded. And yet, it's easy to tell how carefully she had written its name, the painstaking care behind every perfectly-lettered penstroke—"LIAN". Lian. Or is it Li An? Strange for sourdough. Perfect for a daughter.

A sickly sensation curdles in the pit of my stomach. I turn the jar until the name faces away from me.

It's no use. There's no sense in keeping it. I've never once used the oven. And what do I know about starters? I don't even like sourdough, hate the way it crunches in the mouth and stabs at the gums, coagulating with saliva into a textural nightmare.

I pick up the jar. The glass is cool to the touch, its weight shifting strangely in my palm. Inside, the viscous mixture appears to squirm in its place, as if sensing its fate.

Tilting the jar, I watch as air bubbles burst across its surface, stretching into sinewy limbs that cling to the walls and linger even as its drooping mass coagulates in the bottom of its enclosure. The center of gravity turns on its axis. I tilt again, slowly, back and forth, watching this amorphous form contort itself. Always growing. A grotesque metamorphosis without start or end. The movement is morbid. *Mesmerising.*

Just like that, Lian comes alive in my hands.

It would've been a pain to scrape out anyway.

•••

It was quiet when it happened. So was the aftermath, the cremation, a private affair. It was difficult to cry with a mask.

Pa was there too, of course, though we barely spoke a word. I couldn't tell you what was harder —seeing his impassive face again after six years, or peering down at Ma's face in the casket, equally impassive. The grief poured into me all at once. I wanted to reach in and hold her warm hand again. But I couldn't. Didn't. Her cold spread to me, even without touching.

I think he did feel bad. Even through the tears, I caught his hands fidgeting by his sides, like maybe he wanted to reach out—more likely, just twitching for a cigarette. I wouldn't have shaken his hand anyway, even without the SMMs[1]. Not for the warmth of the world.

After, the attendant brought out a tray with bits of ash and bone. All that she was, reduced to dust.

"She always had a strong jaw," Pa remarked, a poor attempt at levity. Maybe he really didn't care. Doesn't matter. I hated him.

The attendant laughed. I saw her crinkled eyes above the mask. She muttered something but I stopped listening, couldn't bear it. I turned, ignoring her calls, his shouts, no goodbyes, nothing, just walking until I reached the lobby doors and stepped out into the humid afternoon.

For a moment, I looked up and stood completely still, allowing the heat to close in around me. The midday sun blinded me. Swirling afterimages followed me to the car, infiltrating my vision even as I started the engine. But these too faded by the time I drove out of Mandai carpark and left them all behind.

•••

Lian was waiting for me when I got home. She airs her complaints the moment I unclasp the lid, her displeasure sour in my nostrils. A hundred hungry maws open as I shovel in a generous heap of flour, chewing at the spoon, demanding more.

"Easy, Lianlian. There you go. Much better, right? Don't whine anymore."

[1]COVID-19 Safe Management Measures

The guide online said to feed her twice daily, especially in these infant days—though she's not quite so infant anymore. She's a fast-growing child. Adolescent, at the very least, given her recent moodiness. She'll grow out of it. Lian and I have developed a real bond. Everyone's still locked up at home, and work is all remote, so we've spent nearly all our time together. Most nights, I turn the TV on and we eat in silence, listening to the newscaster. A comfortable routine. Simple.

Tonight is different. Tonight, I tell her about Ma and Pa, the fallout and the cremation, everything in-between. She absorbs it all without a word—of course she does; she's bottled bacteria. But her silence eats at me.

"Say something," I blurt out, frustrated.

The newscaster drones on, something about fluctuating trends and coming change.

Inside her jar, Lian gurgles, swallows, and says her first real words.

What's there to say?

•••

Lian talks nonstop, ever since learning to speak. She has weaponised language against me, and now she argues all the time. More. More. More. She thrashes against the walls, bubbling angrily.

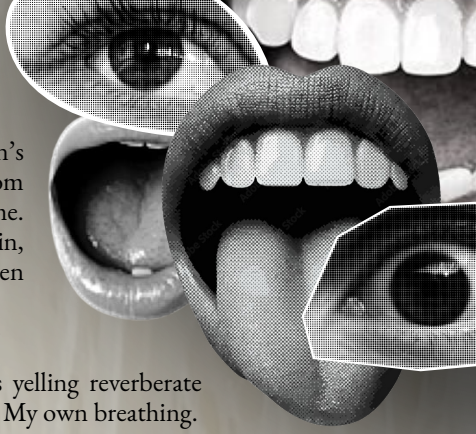
"You've had enough!" I yell, but her fingers pry at the rubber seal of the lid, and then she squeezes out, slipping down the jar to run all over the table, searching.

"I said *enough*!"

I sweep the bag of flour off the counter, locking it in a cupboard. Enraged, Lian sprawls herself across the counter. I wrangle her with a cloth, tying it tight over the mouth of her jar. It fails to gag her. Now she's shrieking, flailing, mouths and eyes melting into drooling cavities, an amalgamation of orifices.

Overcome with terror, I recoil, fleeing into the bedroom, but Lian follows me. I hear her even now. I draw the blanket around me in a protective cocoon. Sleep comes uneasily. In my dreams, I see my mother cradling a wailing babe in her arms, rocking gently. She smiles at me, beckoning. Come look. Peering down, I see Ma's face, just as it had been last I saw her, except her face is twisting and morphing and her eyelids are blinking into pursed lips as her mouth gasps into a dozen shifting eyes.

I startle awake, tearing at the membrane of sheets swathed around me as Lian's cries claw down the hallway. I stagger into the shower. Steam presses against the showerpanes, enveloping me in a thick white blur. I duck my head under the water, squeezing my eyes shut, and for a single heady breath, it almost seems to work—all the noise drowned out as dense water vapour sinks into my lungs.



Then I open my eyes, and Lian's thousand-eyed stare emerges from the showerhead, piercing into me. Her hot tears slice into my skin, screeching off the tiles. I slam open the shower doors, stumbling.

LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME!

Lian screams. Shades of father's yelling reverberate through her voice. Ma's weeping. My own breathing.

I burst into the kitchen, watching as Lian turns herself inside out, entrails spilling from her exoskeleton, outgrowing her glass body only to devour it in entirety. It's not enough. Lian is made of emptiness. Hollowness is her form. She will never be full. She'll come for the counter, then the kitchen, the house. Me.

No, I won't be. I won't let her consume me. I am more than emptiness. I am. I am. She won't consume me.

I'll consume *her*.

I gather her up in my arms, swaying her like my mother had done in my dreams. "Don't cry anymore, Lian. I'll set us both free."

I swing. The jar cracks against the counter-edge like a fresh egg, and Lian pours out, its lurid yolk. Patterns of red blossom over her sticky skin as I knead her into shape, picking out bits of glass. It suits her well, gives her face a healthy flush.

I draw a knife right down her middle. How beautifully she splits apart, like the delicate petals of a blooming lotus. Lian squeals when I put her in to bake. Through the dark tempered glass, I watch her chrysalis, writhing and rising, swelling up like a wonderful balloon. Finally, it's time. I withdraw her from the oven, beholding her transformation.

Lian is still and silent in my palms, so hot, I can barely hold her. It reminds me of Ma's warm hands. I giggle at the thought. Then I press my lips to her head, kissing her tenderly.

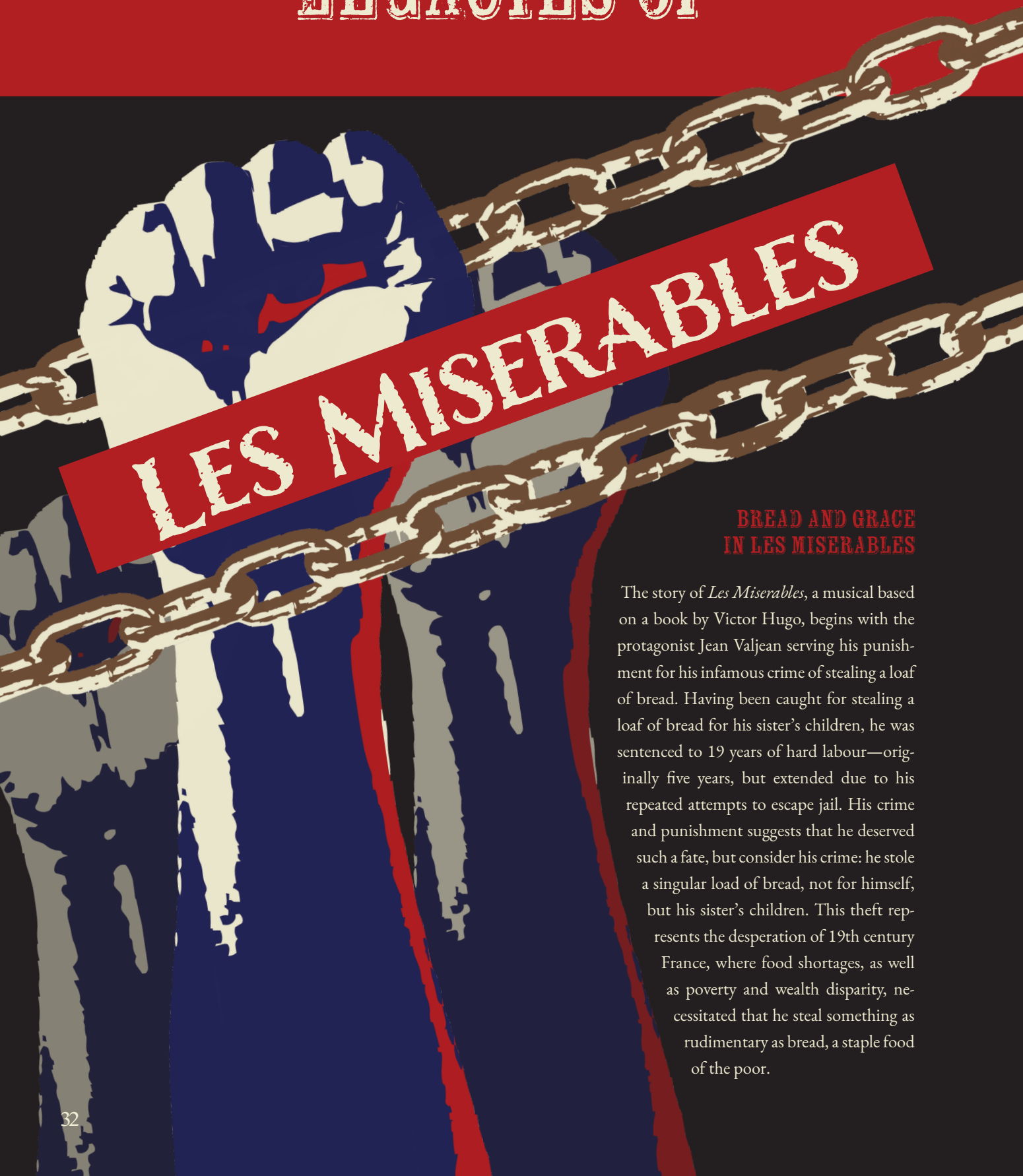
"Thank you, Lian," I whisper. This is my goodbye.

Teeth tear into fibrous tendons, crunching through brittle crust. Tongue licks at sour ligaments, contorting around the acidic tang. It sticks. It burns. Each bite opens infinite holes, exposing every hollow space. But I don't care. I swallow it all, until all that is left of Lian is dust and crumbs on a baking tray. I wipe my mouth. It's done.

Except I see the patterns on the walls. Bread eyes and lotus heads. Mother's mouth. Lian's face. Yeast sinking into a vacuum pit. Twisting. Turning. Squirming. Inside me. It's inside me. It's eating me inside out. It's not enough. It's not enough. It's not enough. It's not enough. I have to get in. I have to get out. I have to be free. I have to look. I'm going in. I'm going inside. More. More. More

GRACE LEONG PRESENTS

LEGACIES OF



LES MISERABLES

BREAD AND GRACE IN LES MISERABLES

The story of *Les Miserables*, a musical based on a book by Victor Hugo, begins with the protagonist Jean Valjean serving his punishment for his infamous crime of stealing a loaf of bread. Having been caught for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's children, he was sentenced to 19 years of hard labour—originally five years, but extended due to his repeated attempts to escape jail. His crime and punishment suggests that he deserved such a fate, but consider his crime: he stole a singular load of bread, not for himself, but his sister's children. This theft represents the desperation of 19th century France, where food shortages, as well as poverty and wealth disparity, necessitated that he steal something as rudimentary as bread, a staple food of the poor.

In the musical, the commoners sing, "*At the end of the day, you're another day colder, and that's all you can say for the life of the poor! And the righteous hurry past, they don't hear the little ones crying...*" Here, the "righteous" refer to the wealthy who fail to notice the hardships of the poor, illustrating the gulf between the poor and the rich in 19th century France. So, when Jean Valjean commits the crime of stealing bread, he does so not out of greed, but need.

Bread, besides reflecting the socioeconomic circumstances of the poor, also acts as a symbol catalysing Jean Valjean's transformation. After his release from prison, he was caught by Bishop Muriel for stealing bread and silver candlesticks at the Convent. Instead of calling for his arrest, however, Bishop Muriel allows Jean Valjean to seek refuge at the Convent and gives him a surplus of silver. Here, Bishop Muriel sings, "*There is bread to make you strong, there is bed to rest til morning, rest from pain and rest from wrong.*" This sole act of grace sends Jean Valjean into an identity crisis because bread, something so definitive to his identity as a convict (and something often lacking in his life), is provided to him in abundance. Despite having stolen from the Convent and Bishop Muriel, they still gave him more. It is this act of radical generosity and forgiveness which sets up Jean Valjean to break his cycle of wrongdoing and (literally) transform his identity, from ex-convict to successful business owner in later scenes.

However, his crime continues to plague him throughout the musical, especially in his interactions with police inspector Javert (who sees Jean Valjean as his nemesis). After his release, he finds work at a farm and realises his pay is half that of other labourers. When he complains, they sing to him, "*You broke the law, it's there for people to see. Why should you get the same as honest people like me?*"

Jean Valjean replies, "*Now I know how freedom feels, the jailer is at your heels, it is the law!*" Despite being released from jail, his label as "ex-convict" permeates his entire existence, informing how others view him and treat him with injustice. It shows just how extensively punitive the justice system can be, especially to those who were forced to commit crimes of circumstance. This strict good/bad dichotomy is exhibited best in none other than Javert's views of him.

JEAN VALJEAN VS JAVERT

Javert is a rigid, relentless police inspector who holds an uncompromising, black-and-white view of law and justice. In his mind, all who flout the law must be punished no matter the circumstance—perhaps an attitude he holds due to his insecurity of eventually becoming a criminal himself given his upbringing in prison. Regardless of why he feels this way, it is clear from his introduction in Fantine's Arrest that he is entirely inflexible. He arrests a prostitute for causing a public "disturbance" and strips her of her ability to care for her child. Even so, he sings, "*Honest work, just reward, that's the way to please the Lord!*"

This song is pivotal to the story as we see Jean Valjean (assuming his new identity as Monsieur Madeleine, the Mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer) and Javert interact for the first time. Unlike Javert, Jean Valjean extends mercy by caring for Fantine's child, who grows up to be his adoptive daughter, Cosette. Their diametrically opposing reactions to Fantine's arrest juxtapose the ideology of grace with that of punitive justice, acting as a basis for their recurring conflicts throughout the musical.

Famously, in *The Confrontation*, when Javert finds out who the Mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer really is, he confronts him. Threatening to arrest Jean Valjean for having previously broken his parole, he hisses, "*A man like you will never change*". The Law, as personified through Javert, sees people like Jean Valjean as fixed, unchangeable, and damned for life after committing a felony. This battle between the poor and the Law shows how lacking the justice system is in promoting justice when it does not look out for the welfare of the people.

However, this is not to say the justice system is pointless. Rather, the justice system is just a system built on a society's ideas of right and wrong and what proportionate punishment should be. It would be unfair to condemn someone or define them based on their past, especially when their criminality was bred out of desperation and circumstance. Thus, Javert symbolises the uncompassionate rigidity of a system which fails to love and understand its people.

LES MISERABLES AND THE REVOLUTION

Ultimately, Jean Valjean's microscopic crime of desperation induces sympathy in the audience, for it showcases how our actions, even if "wrong", are often a result of our environment. Our identity cannot be equated solely to our actions when our environment facilitates and determines our actions to such a large extent. Recall Kamala Harris' quote:

> "YOU THINK YOU JUST FELL OUT OF A COCONUT TREE? YOU EXIST IN THE CONTEXT OF ALL IN WHICH YOU LIVE AND WHAT CAME BEFORE YOU."[1]

Valjean's crime reminds us to consider the historical context of the 2nd French Revolution, where opulence and wealth inequality led to the monarchy neglecting the welfare of its people.

As Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher, said,

> "WHEN PEOPLE HAVE NOTHING MORE TO EAT, THEY WILL EAT THE RICH"

Neglecting the welfare of the commoners was what led to the Revolution, as seen in *Les Miserables*, with the rise of the masses best exemplified in the celebrated revolutionary anthem *Do You Hear the People Sing*. The agency of the silent majority is melodically personified in the crescendo of the song—it starts off low and soft, then builds into a triumphant climax.

In modern times, tales of this inequality are not uncommon. Even today, ex-convicts (like Jean Valjean) are discriminated against and struggle to reintegrate into society or mend relationships with loved ones. Thankfully, though, restorative practices have gained popularity in justice systems around the world, like in Singapore, to help rehabilitate broken relationships between an ex-convict and their family. Framed as "alternative traditional models to punitive justice",[2] this framework of dialogue (rather than isolation) mirrors the grace the Bishop offered to Jean Valjean. Opening conversation is the first step to transformation and rehabilitation.

The story of *Les Miserables* ends on a happy note for Jean Valjean. Even though he eventually dies, the grace granted to him by the Bishop at the beginning of the story restores his identity as Jean Valjean, not as prisoner 24601, and allows him a peaceful death which comes after seeing Cosette married. Behind this story of revolution is a story of hope where the "damned" like him too can be transformed and lead a "good" life.

1 CBS News, "Watch Kamala Harris' Viral 'Coconut Tree' Remarks."

2 Edwin Tong, "Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS) 6th Restorative Practice Conference 2025," (speech, Singapore, 2025), Ministry of Home Affairs, https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/newsroom/lutheran-community-care-services-lccs-6th-restorative-practice-conference-2025/

This Season: Subversion on the Runway

By Jonathan Joramsa



High fashion shimmers with a mythic opulence. Gilded invitations are extended only to A-list celebrities and industry titans. Runway shows unfold behind velvet curtains and beneath cathedral ceilings. To the outside observer, haute couture speaks in a private language, intelligible only to those in high society. The esoteric designs that appear on the runway certainly look leagues away from the everyday ready-to-wear fashion that is more familiar (and more financially viable) to most. After all, bejewelled embroidery on vicuña wool or towering headpieces don't seem suitable for a quick dash to the supermarket.

Historically, high fashion thrives on sensation—who can conjure up the flashiest, most eccentric original designs to make the headlines? However, big fashion houses are beginning to embrace a tongue-in-cheek attitude to design, and subversion is the name of the game. Originality is all well and good, but with the increasing interest in interrogating our society (often framed as "wokeness"), we've also seen designers focus more on creating dialogue with the cultural touchstones of today. Fashion's progress is a non-progress: a cycle of refashioning that turns the everyday into luxury, reworks what already exists, and dissolves gender into androgyny. The runways are proposing a fascinating thesis: progress is not about inventing the original, but about taking inspiration from what's already there.



Kitschy Couture

"Kitsch", which crudely means "trash" in German, is a pejorative typically used to describe lowbrow art. This is art that is too loud, too vulgar, and too steeped in popular culture—antithetical to the art exalted in white-walled galleries. When designers embrace the kitschy, they run the risk of being denounced as producing worthless fashion. However, with intentional exaggeration and playfulness, high fashion designers inject their pieces with irony and convey self-awareness of their artifice. They make their message clear: they aim to destabilise convention.

If high fashion typically hinges on being unreachable for the masses, what better way to destabilise convention than to spotlight the ordinary? Balenciaga has repeatedly flirted with the prosaic: yellow construction tape transformed into dresses, a crinkled chips bag refashioned as a clutch, and now the infamous blue IKEA-esque bag reimagined in luxe leather. The gesture is mischievous but deliberate. By placing the banal on the runway, Balenciaga suggests the most valuable cultural artefacts are the ones that represent not the elite classes but the everyday person. Ultimately, these ordinary objects most faithfully embody the collective identity of any society.

Balenciaga isn't the only brand looking to toy with the conventions of design. Since 2016, a cartoonish green dinosaur, known affectionately as Rexy, has become something of Coach's mascot. She's been fashioned into keychains, plastered onto black T-shirts, and even become the blueprint for the brand's dinosaur-shaped bags. Rexy brings a refreshing novelty, disrupting the otherwise mundane monogram that features on many of the brand's designs. Likewise, Thom Browne is no stranger to quirky animal designs. In the Fall 2020 season, he debuted his iconic menagerie of animal-shaped bags (dogs, rabbits, elephants, even a mouse), which felt plucked from a child's toy chest yet styled with knowing sophistication. More recently, during his 2025 Fall/Winter Couture Show, 2000 origami birds formed the impressive backdrop for his collection inspired by the aesthetics of birds. Bespectacled models dressed as ornithologists scoured through the habitat of origami birds — an infusion of childlike whimsy and exploration so often absent from high fashion's steely sensibilities.

These brands show us that refinement is no longer synonymous with reiteration. Instead, fashion is toying with the aesthetics of excess, parody, and even perceived "bad taste." In doing so, it reclaims lowbrow art— cartoonish motifs, novelty shapes, tongue-in-cheek references—and crowns them haute. By drawing from everyday objects, designers anchor their fantasies in shared cultural references, making them legible beyond the high fashion sphere.

Still, accessibility is complicated. A luxury reinterpretation of a supermarket snack remains out of reach for most when accompanied by a four-figure price tag. High fashion may borrow from the masses, but it does not necessarily open its doors to them.

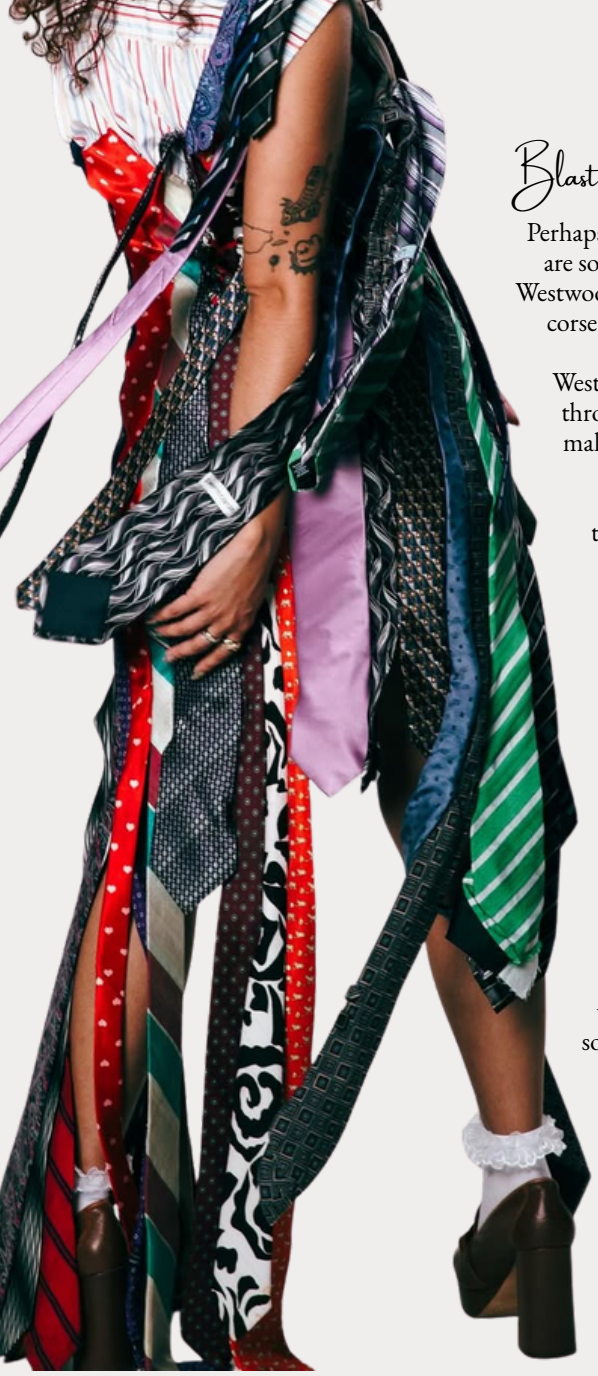
(Under)cutting Clothes and Convention

Enter another form of subversion: subtle refashioning. Consider the square-cut tie at Celine, a minor adjustment that provides a refreshing new take on a centuries-old accessory. Or the scarf-tie hybrid at Valentino, which softens corporate rigidity with a whisper of romance. Meanwhile, Jonathan Anderson's Spring/Summer 2026 campaign for Dior introduced a deliberate casualness: shirts half-tucked, layers askew, proportions slightly off-kilter. It was playful insouciance, echoing the enduring allure of Jane Birkin—the patron saint of the "messy girl" aesthetic.

Here, creative subversion does not require a radical new silhouette. Instead, we're prompted to reimagine ways of wearing what we already own. A tie can be cut bluntly. A scarf can masquerade as a tie. An oversized blazer can be worn with its sleeves pushed up in nonchalance. Even the beloved crop top came out of cutting full-length shirts. These micro-gestures reveal that the clothes languishing in our wardrobe are far from obsolete; with unorthodox styling, they can give birth to new outfits.



Subtle refashioning gestures toward a quieter answer to fashion's perennial sustainability dilemma. Rather than demanding the constant production of new garments, the lifespan of old pieces can be extended through remixing. Fashion's "progress as non-progress" thus becomes quietly liberating: the runway may debut a branded outfit replicable by anyone with a pair of scissors and the heart to experiment and improvise. We may recall that high fashion typifies reinvention (new silhouettes, new narratives, new spectacles every season) to generate sensation. Undeniably, the industry's need for ceaseless innovation raises uncomfortable questions about environmental and creative sustainability. But by demonstrating that innovation can arise from the pieces we already possess, this approach provides a possible solution to both the environmental cost and the financial exclusivity that typically define high fashion.



Blasting Through The Binaries

Perhaps the most profound subversion is the continued erosion of rigid gender codes that are so deeply entrenched in many patriarchal societies. Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood's Spring/Summer 2026 presented silhouettes that gleefully dismantled binaries: corsetry paired with suiting, kilts styled with structured blazers, tailoring that refused to fit under the category of "menswear" or "womenswear." For a house like Vivienne Westwood, largely credited as the catalyst for British punk culture, this impulse to blast through the gender binary is hardly new. Punk culture is famously anti-establishment, making it a safe space for androgynous expression. Accordingly, the brand has revelled in sending men down the runway in their iconic tartan skirts, recasting corsetry as armour and playing with the spectrum of gender expression. Kronthaler's return to the runway demonstrates the label's rebellion against gender norms continues to endure today.

While the rise of androgynous styles is not new, it still feels urgent. The power dressing of the 1980s and the grunge dishevelment of the 1990s were important political movements responding to radical shifts in society: the former aimed to desexualise women entering corporate worlds and the latter sought to reject the craze of mass consumerism. Today, it is the visibility of gender identity which transforms androgyny from simple subversive novelty to a necessary reflection of lived experiences. When non-binarism and genderqueerness are increasingly recognised as valid gender identities, fashion must respond by making space for ambiguity.

While many mainline designer brands retain the tradition of having a menswear and womenswear collection, we saw Loewe echo this ambiguity in its Fall 26 collection. Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez, who have been designing women's clothes for over two decades, debuted a menswear collection weaving in a softened sensibility. Traditionally masculine silhouettes gently absorbed the fluidity, tactility, and decorative nuance often reserved for the feminine. Oversized jackets swallow the frame; trousers hang low and loose; fabrics traditionally coded as feminine, like silk, are recut into sharp, architectural lines. McCollough said it himself best, "When we started editing the pieces, we almost ignored who was a boy and who was a girl. We were more looking at flow and how things connect to one another." Rather than inventing a new visual language, their debut reinforces how fashion's progression lies in borrowing from and subtly distorting familiar categories until these categories disappear.

Under One Marble Roof

In dismantling and reconfiguring these norms, fashion once again performs its curious non-progress. It revisits silhouettes long associated with rebellion and reframes them for a generation fluent in fluidity. The lowbrow and the highbrow, the masculine and the feminine, the serious and the silly—all coexist on the same runway. As these once-rigid categories begin to overlap, the lines separating them start to dissolve. Perhaps then, the dissolution of division is high fashion's most radical form of progress.



BY: NAIJA MEHRA

the art of Political RageBait

There is something oddly exhausting about politics today—not the messy business of governance itself, but the version that arrives in our feeds: sharpened to a point, stripped of context, and served up hot for immediate consumption. Contemporary political consciousness is one that is simultaneously intoxicating and exhausting. We scroll past headlines that feel less like information and more like provocations, each one engineered to lodge under our skin. What was once the slow, uneven work of debate has been replaced by something quicker, more addictive, and far less nourishing.

Ragebait has become the dominant yeast in our political discourse, inflating everything it touches into loud, hollow spectacle. The term itself, crowned Oxford's Word of the Year for 2025, captures the mechanism perfectly. Ragebait is online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage usually to drive traffic, comments, and shares. And in the current digital ecosystem, it works with extraordinary efficiency, not because people are inherently more gullible than in previous generations, but because the architecture of attention itself has been fundamentally reshaped. The system doesn't care whether we admire, hate, or even comprehend what we consume; it only cares that we respond.



This creates a striking inversion of value. The work of governance, which is necessarily deliberate, procedural, and slow, rarely produces the kind of immediate gratification that thrives in digital circulation. Nuanced policy debates, careful legislative negotiation, or even painstaking investigative reporting struggle to compete with the raw simplicity of outrage distilled into thirty-second clips. Complexity becomes friction, and friction is anathema to virality. Our political environment is defined less by substantive discourse than by the cumulative heat of our reactions. In this context, anger is not incidental, rather it is incentivised.



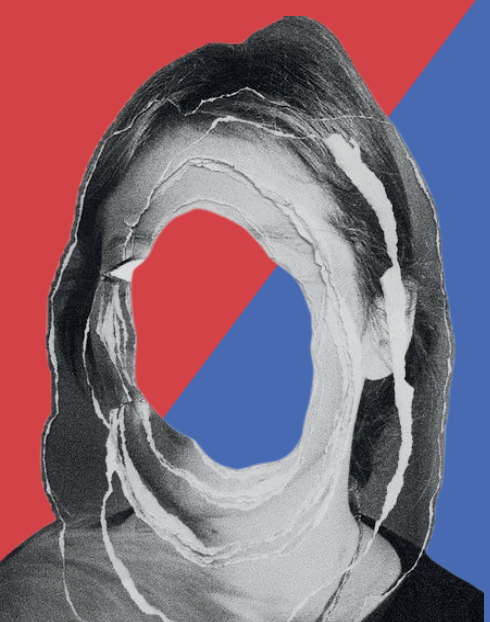
But this does more than reshapinge the mechanics of attention; it reshapes perception itself. We are rarely shown a balanced or representative portrait of the ideological other. We are not shown our own side in its fullness, nor the other side in its complexity. Instead we are fed the most extreme, unhinged caricature of the opposition—the version most likely to raise blood pressure and keep us doomscrolling. The result is a quiet but profound cultural stratification. Millions participate vicariously through screens, feeling politically alive because they are angry, while real-world engagement narrows to the loudest and most polarised voices.

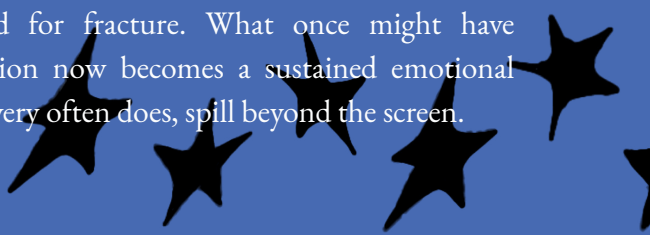


And yet, it would be intellectually dishonest to suggest that all contemporary anger is manufactured. The political landscape itself is, in many respects, genuinely infuriating. Revelations of corruption, institutional failure, and moral negligence are not algorithmic hallucinations. They are real. When survivors of abuse confront institutions that protect perpetrators, when political leaders act with impunity or indifference, when policy decisions seem to consistently fail the most vulnerable, outrage is an understandable and even necessary response. The problem lies not in the existence of this anger but in how it is circulated, intensified, and monetised. Complex, painful realities are distilled into endlessly looping clips, stripped of procedural detail and long-term context, transforming sustained injustice into perpetual agitation.

The hidden costs accumulate slowly, like fatigue after too many empty calories. Viral outrage feels like participation, yet it is a form of slacktivism, more of a digital performance rather than civic labour. It is white-bread activism: it fills the stomach for a moment but leaves the body malnourished. We tell ourselves we have done something because we have felt something, while the underlying structures of corruption, inequality, and institutional failure remain untouched. This is not to dismiss the symbolic power of digital solidarity, but to question its sufficiency.

The pipeline from a single infuriating TikTok to real-world harm has grown dangerously short: verbal aggression, protests, and even radicalisation are increasingly facilitated by sustained exposure to curated extremity. A single inflammatory clip rarely radicalises anyone on its own, but repetition recalibrates perception and the architecture of rage accelerates this progression. Each interaction calibrates the feed toward sharper edges, more inflammatory framings, more totalising language. The result is not merely a louder discourse but a more brittle one, primed for fracture. What once might have remained a passing irritation now becomes a sustained emotional climate, one that can, and very often does, spill beyond the screen.





Perhaps the most insidious effect of ragebait is the subtle conflation of emotion with action. Feeling outraged can feel like participation, and in a society that measures engagement in shares, likes, and comments, it is easy to mistake intensity of feeling for meaningful involvement. But authentic political engagement is rarely instantaneous. It is slow, cumulative, and often invisible, resembling a long fermentation rather than an explosive reaction. Ragebait is the industrial instant-yeast version: it produces impressive volume, like shares, comments, and temporary voter surges, but very little depth or durability. We are left highly stimulated yet no closer to addressing the conditions that provoked our anger in the first place.

To resist ragebait is not to withdraw from politics. It is to recognise when content is intended to inflame rather than inform, and to seek the fuller, more complex picture that algorithms rarely prioritise. It is to distinguish between the fleeting thrill of outrage and the enduring work of civic responsibility. And, perhaps most importantly, it is to remember that our collective political health depends not on the intensity of our indignation, but on the depth of our attention, the breadth of our empathy, and the patience to engage with reality in all its nuance, however inconvenient or infuriating that reality may be.





RUMOUR LOAF

A MANUAL FOR BAKING CERTAINTY IN A KITCHEN OF SWEET HALLUCINATIONS (PLEASE DO NOT STORM ANYTHING).

RUSSELL SHEN
REN 001

FIRST, A NOTE FOR BEGINNER BAKERS: THIS RECIPE FAILS IF YOU ADD TRANSPARENCY.
I KNOW IT SOUNDS ABSURD. RUMOURS, HOWEVER, ARE LIKE DOUGH. THEY NEED WARMTH, A LITTLE SOCIAL SUGAR, AND MOST OF ALL, ZERO ANNOYING FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS.

Area 51 is an example of what happens when the government gives the public a real, secluded location, very little explanation of what goes on there, and several decades to get weird with it. It's the perfect sourdough starter: one part fact, several parts silence, and an enthusiastic public feeding it until the final product barely resembles the original dough. Groom Lake, the dry lakebed in Nevada around which Area 51 developed, was selected in 1955 for U-2 testing and later aircraft programmes.[1] At first, it was just a military site in the desert. The aliens were not there yet; the legend came later.[2] The dough needed time to rise.

This is what makes Area 51 such a luxury ingredient. It's not famous because people know what's there. It's famous because they don't, and the government has spent decades being deeply unhelpful about it. Give the public a fence, a no-comment, and a vague sense that something important is happening inside, and they will do the rest. Not calmly, of course. They will do it with documentaries, whispered insider claims, blurry lights, and the confidence of people who have mistaken atmosphere for evidence. Today, the public freestyles alien lore about Area 51 with a seriousness the facts never earned. The formula is old and embarrassingly effective: when official information is absent or inadequate, rumour rushes in to make itself useful.[3] it becomes a feast of the public imagination. Stories rise. Boring facts stay flat.

WHY YOU WILL LOVE THIS LOAF:

Zero factual calories: Facts are optional. Ambiguity is the only ingredient that must not be substituted. This dough rises best when importance and uncertainty collide.[4] If people care deeply and nobody has the full story, congratulations: your starter is thriving. Light, airy, and completely devoid of nutritional value, it remains a beloved snack of the hungry public.

Naturally Airy: This batch proves itself overnight. Manual labour is optional. The crowd performs the work, diligently kneading, prodding, and inflating the account until truth is stretched thin enough to see right through it. By morning, what began as a whisper has acquired the arrogance of a headline. The baker is gone, but every local claims they smelled the oven from a mile away.

Historically Tested: Area 51 comes with decades of documented military history,[5] acting as a structural base which creates a sturdy dough. The best rumours never rise from a vacuum. They start with something real that keeps getting fed until the final loaf eclipses the original facts entirely.

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[1]Groom Lake is a dry lakebed in southern Nevada associated with the remote testing site now popularly known as Area 51. In 1955, U-2 testing took place at Groom Lake under conditions of extreme secrecy. Central Intelligence Agency, "Area 51 and the Accidental Test Flight," August 6, 2015.
[2]Jeffrey T. Richelson, "The Secret History of the U-2—and Area 51," National Security Archive, August 15, 2013.
[3]Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman argued that rumours intensify when a topic feels important but the available evidence remains ambiguous. Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947).
[4]Allport and Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor.*
[5]"Area 51," *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

Excellent Viral Potential: Novelty is rocket fuel. This loaf outruns the truth because it tastes better, feels rarer, and arrives glazed in secrecy.[6] A military site is an appetiser. Alien technology is a five-course meal. Naturally, the public makes a reservation for the dramatic. They are hungry for the chef's special.

Here is the recipe. This loaf doubles while you sleep. It tastes like absolute certainty. Facts are strictly optional. Its nutritional value is roughly equivalent to a sweet hallucination.



INGREDIENTS:

The Base (The Structural Grain)

- **One Heritage Site:** Choose a location with deep roots. Groom Lake is the standard. It provides the grit needed to hold a heavy legend together.
- **A Seal of Silence:** Secrecy is the jar. If the truth leaks out of the vacuum, the dough will never rise.
- **A Hungry Audience:** This works best when the public is starved for answers and has zero access to the kitchen. Bonus points if locally sourced.

The Fermentation (The Heat)

- **Pure Ambiguity:** Add when the stakes are high. Uncertainty is the sugar that feeds the frenzy.
- **A Pinch of Tension:** Stress[7] is the catalyst. Not ordinary panic, but the itch of knowing something is behind the door and being told, repeatedly, that there is no door. That pressure softens hard, heavy facts into light, fluffy, and very palatable fictions.

The Garnish (Credibility engine)

- **The Illusion of Proximity:** Sprinkle on top. Use phrases like "my source on the inside." It provides the seductive aftertaste of secret knowledge.
- **One Blurry Snapshot:** Low resolution is key. It must be vague enough to be anything, but framed as if it's everything.

THE METHOD

Step 1: Activate the Starter.
Start with the fence. Use Groom Lake: a real location with real desert dust. It should be just visible enough to become an itch the public cannot scratch. Right now, your dough is just dense military history. It is dry. It is boring. Do not panic. A good starter does not need drama yet. It just needs a Restricted Area sign and silence.

Step 2: Add Heat.
Introduce ambiguity. Toss in a few official "no comment" statements and a sprinkle of blurry lights. Add secrecy until the facts stop settling at the bottom. This is the activation phase. When the heat is on, the bubbles start to form. If the public begins guessing to fill the silence, you have hit the sweet spot.

Step 3: Let the Internet Knead.
Hand the dough over to the crowd. Let them stretch, pull, and punch the story until the original truth is a distant memory. Fold in a few crowd-led whistleblowers with suspiciously confident tones. By now, the runway should begin to look like a galactic arrival gate. What started as a question is already acquiring the arrogance of an answer.

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[6]Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–1151.

[7]Here, "stress" refers to the social and psychological pressure created when a subject feels important but reliable information remains unclear or unavailable. See Allport and Postman, The Psychology of Rumor.

Step 4: Long Fermentation.
Leave the dough in the dark corners of the web—forums and 2 a.m. documentaries are perfect. The goal is for the story to expand until it loses all structural logic. Resist the urge to clarify. Facts are inhibitors. They slow the rise. Let it proof until the original shape is unrecognisable.

Step 5: The Final Bake.
Slide the loaf into the oven of folklore. Crank the heat with viral memes and "Storm Area 51" events organised on Facebook. Bake until the crust is thick enough to deflect a press release. By now, the rumour is set. Official government reports can be brushed on for a glossy finish, but they will not change the flavour of the lie.

Step 6: Serve Warm.
Slice it thin. Pass it to people who were not there but speak as if they were the ones who preheated the oven. Best enjoyed with a side of awe and the comforting, half-delirious belief that the truth is always just one hangar away.

STORAGE INSTRUCTIONS

Store in a vacuum: Rumours are anaerobic. They wilt in sunlight, oxygen, and follow-up questions. Keep your loaf in a sealed group chat, a private forum, or a comment section moderated entirely by vibes. That is how the fluff survives.

Avoid transparency: Transparency behaves like mould. Once a fact-check hits the crust, the whole loaf starts to sag. If truth leaks into the container, move the loaf to a darker corner of the internet immediately. Do not store near context.

Shelf life: This loaf is effectively immortal. If interest goes stale, reheat with a "Breaking News" headline containing no new information. Panic restores texture beautifully.

Freezing instructions: If reality gets too loud, freeze the story. Wait five years, or until no one remembers the debunking theory. Then thaw, rename it a "Cold Case" or "Retro Mystery," and serve again.



United States Geological Survey. (1968). Area 51 Groom Lake: Picture from 1968 [Satellite image]. Wikimedia Commons.

YMK. (2.8.18). USS Nimitz 2.8.84 "Tic Tac" UFO [Digital illustration]. Wikimedia Commons.

Groom Mine overlooking Area 51. From family says land overlooking Area 51 is worth $10M—USAF says $33.8K, by T. Rogoway, 2.8.19, The War Zone.

U.S. Department of Defense. (2.8.2.8). FLIR1 UAP video still [Infrared video frame]. YMK. (2.8.18). Wikimedia Commons.

Beer Bellies

by Sarah Lam Kei Yi

Bellies breathing bubbles,
bumbling batches blinking behind bleary buddies.
Backyards become bodegas,
brandy brings burps,
bellowing between brawls.
Binging booze, boons, booms.
Breathing bliss, breathing blessings.

Bellies bubble boisterously.
Bellies become bottles.
Boys become bigots, babes become bimbos.
Boys become boys become brawlers become boys.
Blood bubbles burgundy,
boiling, bruising, bawling, brawling.
Blackouts burn books, blitz bruised brains.

Belch.
Blackout.
Blowout.
Boys became basketcases.
Bring back bliss,
bring back bawling.
Bring back balancing.

Bubbles blur blindness.
Bawl behind beauty.
Boast bodaciously.
Badger boastfully.
Bear boyhood.
Butcher blackouts.
Bring back buoyancy.

Author's Note:
Beer Bellies explores how someone navigates the world of alcohol, both in terms of literal drunkenness as well as its social implications. The poem ultimately aims to represent growth and learning to navigate one's relationship with substances that can bring both high highs as well as low lows.

The Mirror Did Not Warn Me Against The Wild Child

BY DANIELLA BONITA RULIN

I remember when my world ended. The prophetic End of the World did not come to pass in 2012, as predicted by various misleading sources on the internet, but when I stood in a school bathroom stall, staring at the rust-coloured bloom on my underwear. No swelling music. No helpful adult voiceover. Just bright, fluorescent lighting and the quiet realisation that my body had done something without asking me first.

Before then, I had believed my body and I were collaborators, associates on friendly speaking terms. If I was hungry, it growled. If I was tired, it slowed down. Unfortunately, puberty shattered that harsh illusion. Blood arrived unannounced. Hair sprouted in places I had never considered would. My skin broke out. My scent changed. My chest felt tender and visible. I could feel myself being looked at differently, even before I could understand why.

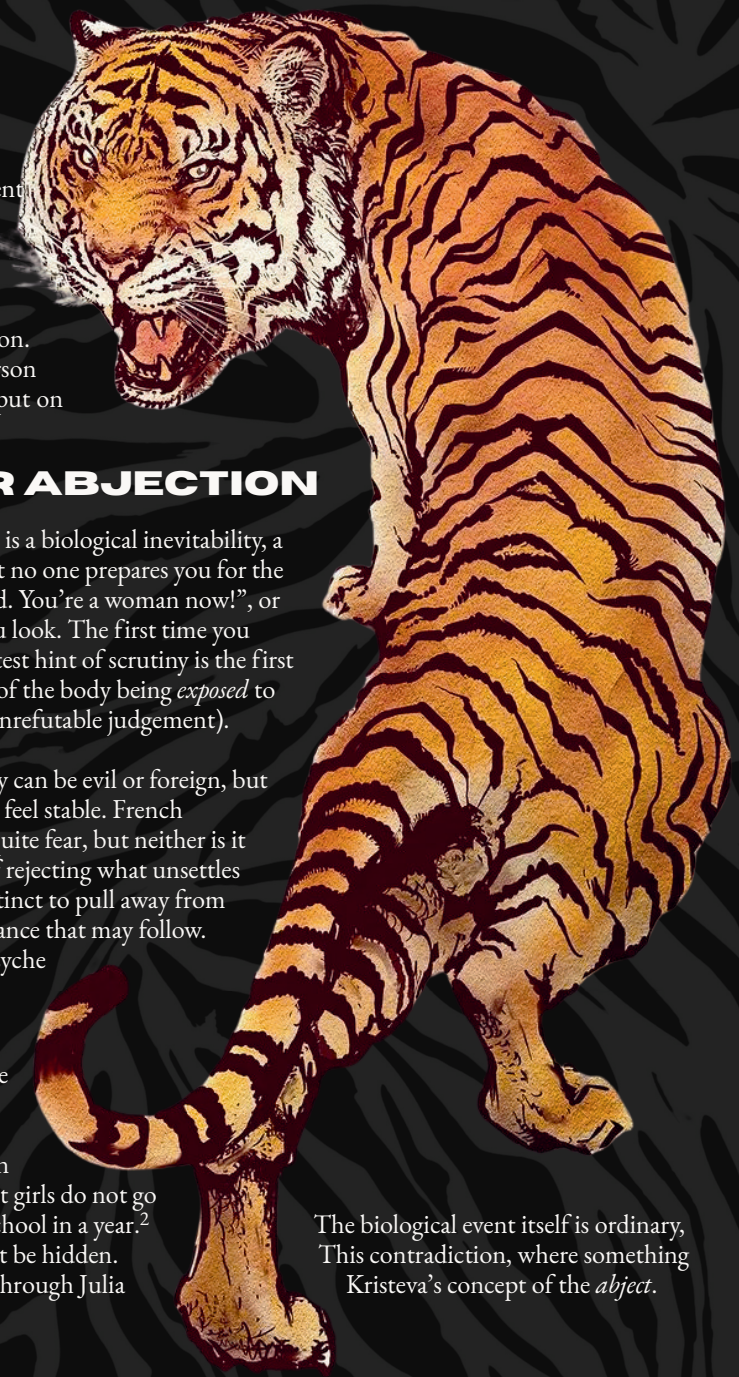
Puberty is the first time the body moves ahead of its person. It leaks. It swells. It announces itself. And suddenly, a person is no longer just a person, but a shifting body of nature put on excruciating display.

THE BODY IS MADE FOR ABJECTION

Society often frames puberty as a milestone. Growing up is a biological inevitability, a rite of passage, or even a chapter in a health textbook. But no one prepares you for the first time your mother tells you, "Sit with your legs closed. You're a woman now!", or when an estranged uncle comments on how "grown" you look. The first time you become aware that your body might incite even the slightest hint of scrutiny is the first of many firsts, firsts that never cease to evoke the feeling of the body being *exposed* to the elements (of the external gaze; of eyes filled with an unrefutable judgement).

There are certain things we recoil from instinctively. They can be evil or foreign, but most importantly, they blur the boundaries we rely on to feel stable. French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls this *abjection*.[1] It's not quite fear, but neither is it disgust. Rather, *abjection* describes the psychic process of rejecting what unsettles the self. In tandem, repulsion refers to the immediate instinct to pull away from it, while revulsion captures the deeper emotional disturbance that may follow. The *abject* is therefore an entity rejected by the human psyche because it destabilises the boundaries between self and other, often provoking both revulsion and fascination.

Blood is the clearest example of the *abject* form. Inside the body, blood signifies life. Outside the body, it indicates danger. The same substance takes on different meanings according to its context. A survey by Plan International in Uganda and Indonesia even found that half of adolescent girls do not go to school while menstruating, missing up to 24 days of school in a year.[2] yet social attitudes transform it into something that must be hidden. natural becomes culturally intolerable, can be explained through Julia



The biological event itself is ordinary, This contradiction, where something Kristeva's concept of the *abject*.

For Kristeva, the *abject* threatens identity. It refers to matter that is out of place, and in its misplacement, unsettles the borders we construct to separate self from Other, clean from unclean, order from chaos. We build our identities on the idea that we are coherent and contained within our bodies, though the *abject* interrupts that illusion.

Puberty is naturally saturated with these interruptions. Hence, the self becomes partially Othered. This is *abjection* on a personal level; the discomfort of encountering something within yourself that feels foreign. Puberty produces a version of you that you did not consciously choose, prompting an expansion that can feel like an unmanageable excess. It complicates the idea of innocence by unveiling ideas about sexuality and fertility that have remained hidden until this moment of rupture, catalysing forces that societies often seek to regulate.

THE GIRL WHO GREW STRIPES

These tensions between bodily change and social reaction have been explored vividly in contemporary storytelling. In 2023, Malaysian filmmaker Amanda Eu Nell released *Tiger Stripes*, an independent coming-of-age film about eleven-year-old Zaffan who begins her period before all her other classmates. Being educated in an Islamic school, she is publicly barred from praying with the rest of her classmates as a menstruating woman is considered to be unclean or "unholy".[3] The film situates puberty within the terrain of body horror, illustrating an emerging study of how the pubescent female body becomes socially and symbolically *abject*.



As the film progresses, Zaffan begins to see physical changes in her body and her classmates bully her for it. Soon enough, stretch marks (which share a suspiciously similar pattern to tiger stripes) start appearing on her body, her hair grows in overwhelming waves, and her hands contort into a set of undeniably feline claws. This rendition of Zaffan as a tiger reflects how female maturation is culturally animalised. The adolescent girl, often framed as hormonal and volatile, hence transforms into a physical embodiment of the instinctual aggression and vitality that comes with the force of puberty.

As the film climaxes, Zaffan's rage grows and festers, ultimately transforming her into a wild, almost unrecognisable beast that an Islamic leader attempts to exorcise. By staging her transformation as demonic intrusion, puberty is reframed as possession and her exorcism functions as a disciplinary spectacle. The ritual displaces communal anxiety onto her body, constructing it as a site of contamination in need of cleansing. The abject Zaffan is put on display as an object of spectacle. Her visible "correction" serves as a warning for the community—behave like a "proper" woman or be punished like her. This ritual purification hence acts as social regulation, encouraging community members to stay within the boundaries of acceptable femininity.

At the same time, the film resists collapsing into pure tragedy as an electric current of dark humour and defiance runs through Zaffan's arc. Her abjection is not purely negative, for if the abject destabilises identity, it also creates space for its reconstitution. She eventually embraces her tiger form and refuses to shrink herself back into societal acceptability. In doing so, Zaffan transforms *abjection* into *assertion*.

By the end of the film, *Tiger Stripes* suggests that the sense of "monstrosity" attached to adolescent girls is rarely about the body itself. Instead, it arises from social expectations that struggle to accommodate visible change. When institutions like schools label the adolescent female body as excessive or disruptive, natural bodily transformations become framed as behavioural failures rather than ordinary processes of growth. As a result, girls are pressured to continue adhering to expectations of propriety and restraint even while undergoing intense physical and emotional change trapped within rigid society demands that leave little room for transformation.

RECONSIDERING THE WILD

Puberty can be unsettling because it exposes the body's refusal to remain stable and predictable. What is often dismissed as adolescent awkwardness is frequently treated as a sign of impropriety or loss of control. In this way, ordinary expressions of growth become associated with "wildness", framed as moral failures and not natural transformation. Yet wildness is only life refusing to stay domesticated.

In Tiger Stripes, the tiger is a sordid reminder that there is something in us that will not be groomed into silence. The "wildness" the film evokes is the body's instinctive refusal to remain passive while undergoing transformation. Puberty destabilises the illusion that the self is fully in control of the body, as natural process of bodily growth and desire force themselves into visibility. The tiger externalises this tension by embodying the fear attached to a body that can no longer remain unchanged, and the film ultimately suggests that such "wildness" is an unavoidable aspect of becoming. Puberty cannot be conquered, but must be survived and understood, for within its unruly transformations lies a self that is more alive than it once appeared to be.



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What The Gut Cannot Digest

By Jasmine

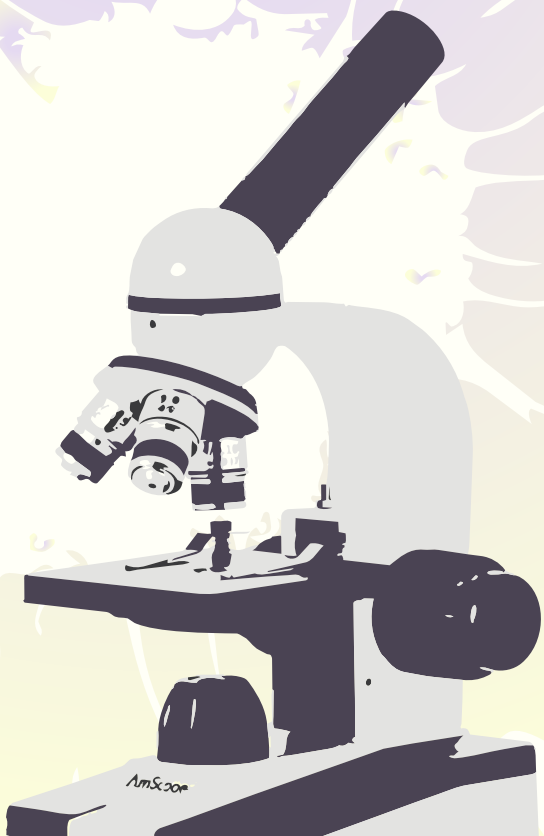
Strand One: The Reckoning

Long before we named it, before we domesticated wheat or mapped the genome, Saccharomyces cerevisiae was respiring, fermenting, adapting. It has been witness to ice ages, atmospheric shifts, extinctions. Millenia later, we consume this antiquity across the world. North East Asia fermented cabbage - "Kimchi" - out of winter preservation rituals; in Europe, wild S. cerevisiae and lactic acid bacteria that can be traced back to Ancient Egypt births the ubiquitous sourdough. Traces of yeast in kombucha and soy sauce carry millenia of adaptation and grit, and now it travels down our trachea, undergoes peristalsis and thus, our ancestry blooms in our gut. This had been the way up until the American need to feed their military in the World War II, and in 1945, the optimised, powdered eggs fed as fuelslop to the soldiers that killed and were killed were redirected to civilian markets for profit and gluttony, and modern industrial food production cranked on its factory lights. Now, annexed to the food we consume are plastic packages, labels with transsaturated fats readily calculated. Food product instead of nourishment.

Strand Two: The Arrival

When I first arrived in Singapore alone as an exchange student after a month-long stint in Hong Kong and another couple months in London, I experienced a nugget of information on a fleeting Instagram Reel about the idea of "cultural microbial environment". This concept refers to distinct, place-specific ecosystems of bacteria, yeasts, and fungi that co-evolve with human food practices over time. The sudden change in microbial environment, from a temperate Europe to Subtropical Southeast Asia, correlated to a physiological crash in my body, and I had been driven to such anxiety about my changing bowel movements to the point where I sent myself to the A&E department. A series of examinations later, I received the results that it was 'just' IBS.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is a disorder in which the gut appears to be normally functioning, but the connecting nerves and muscles aren't properly working. The IBS experience consists of bloating, abdominal pain, cramping, and irregular bowel movements. IBS is a unique condition in that it has a material impact on one's life, but it is solely psychosomatic. This condition is not just the body's reaction after deviating from the ancestral natural diet to one of refined carbohydrates and high-fructose corn syrup, but also the gut's reaction when it notices it has departed from its motherland for a foreign one.



Strand Three: The Ouroboros

Ancient cultures also offer an angle. The Indian and Chinese system of medicine have hypothesized that psychosomatic conditions like IBS retains a spiritual element; IBS is a result of a deviation from values, and only reinforces the body-mind connection that one ought to nourish.

In Ayurveda, digestion is governed by "Agni", the metabolic "fire" that transforms food into usable tissue (dhātu), energy, and vitality. When Agni is strong, nourishment is properly assimilated. When it weakens, residue accumulates. That residue is called ama: incompletely digested matter, understood not only as physical byproduct but as metabolic stagnation. Ama is described as heavy, dull, and obstructive. In the body, it manifests as lethargy, bloating, and coating on the tongue, paralleling its counterpart in the mind of fogginess, low mood, and inertia. This framework is an Ouroboros: poor digestion births ama, and ama ruins Agni, feeding upon its own imbalance. Ayurveda extends the understanding of IBS beyond biomechanical digestion; meals must be digested but so must experience. Emotional events of grief, anger, and fear that are not metabolised leave their own internal residue. This interdependence is distilled in the maxim from the Charaka Samhita:

Rogah sarve api mande agnau; All diseases arise when Agni is impaired.

When the fire of Agni burns completely and wholly, both body and mind are lucid. When the transformation of food and experience falters, waste accumulates.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, digestion is energetic and relational. The gut is crucial to balance and emotion "Qi". The Huangdi Neijing adds a color to the understanding of our digestion: the Spleen (Pi) and Stomach (Wei) are the "root of postnatal Qi": the system responsible for transforming food into Qi, Blood, and nourishment. The stomach receives and ripens food, directing its Qi downward. Emotional unrest and anxiety disturbs Qi and the natural downwards movement of peristalsis. When the stomach rebels upwards, symptoms such as acid reflux, nausea, and upper abdominal discomfort arise. The spleen governs transportation and transformation as it extracts the essence from food to distribute it throughout the body. In TCM, this is associated with pensiveness and rumination, mirroring a mind that over-processes. While the Western understanding of neurogastroenterology posits that poorly digested food leads to bloating, TCM adds a contextual explanation: that excessive thinking knots Qi, which impairs Spleen function, manifesting in fatigue, dampness, and distension.

Strand Four: The Refusal

From the perspective of The Vegetarian by Han Kang, IBS can be understood as a body that refuses smooth functioning in a world that demands productivity. The book was written in the context of a South Korean author, a place where capitalism runs rigorous. In the book, Yeong-hye stops eating to remain "pure", as eating meat is seen as ingesting the blood, brutality, and cruelty that killing carries. Eating, to her, is seen as complicit, and digestion is the incorporation of violence into the self.

IBS is a disorder of the gut-brain interaction, as the gut is structurally intact, but disregulated. Ayurvedic and Chinese readings of the gut as a system that reacts to environmental disturbance. Han Kang adds a third layer: the gut as political. The body not only inherently struggles to digest stress, but also can choose to resist rupture the same way Yeong-hye refuses to digest violence.

Fermentation is decay that nourishes rather than destroys. It is natural transformation, no, transcendence, without annihilation. Its anachronistic nature to life today offers a quiet counter-position to modern eating; symbiosis over synthetic.

Processed foods are engineered for shelf life and immediacy while fermented foods require coexistence, and synergy between human and microbe. They ask for attention to temperature, to air, to patience. Nothing is sterilised or optimised into submission.

If the gut is a site of cultural memory, then disorders like IBS mark a fracture in that continuity. They expose what happens when bodies are asked to digest too quickly: food, expectations, histories. It is all too common now to try to understand things in isolation: modern medicine isolates the gut to its mechanics and elimination schedules. But psychosomatic conditions like IBS demand a holistic understanding of the body. We reverberate along the same lines traced by ancient systems of medicine;: digestion as harmony. Fermentation reminds us that thriving does not require domination. It requires balance.

Content warning: References to death

Plume

Written by:

Teo Yi Ling, Dawn

Cloying soil, coiled in
oil; the body emulsified
with
time, the suspension
of
froth, bilious words,
decanted into pools
clogged with
clotting clauses;
colons clustered
to a
mark, a motif;
moon bruise,
runes pooled
through paper; adipocere,
snow mould,
blood marsh;
the flower's bloat,
floating low,
breath blanched black
bodies in broken bliss
lulled
by skulls, ophelia's [1]
bathtub, shadows
bleeding green into
algal beds, bubbling

past poplars [2], sapphic [3]
cliffs. here
years burst,
dissolving
the doctrine of
eyes —
softness
set in hands,
shaped into space,
pulsing out of
grounds, pages
passing patternless,
aberrations

spilling
emptied,
letters
unclasped, sand bearing

indents, washed and formed in
in waves,
clay,
laying
slates, breaking
into
faces
seeped
between
margins,
moulds folded,
frames
phased to
flames,
melting gazes.

[1] During the painting process of Ophelia by John Everett Millais, depicting Ophelia's death in Hamlet, the model was made to pose in a bathtub during winter

[2] The Greek myth of the Heliades sisters turned into poplar trees in their grief for their brother

[3] The myth of the Greek poet Sappho's death

Fermentation needs a Container

Dickinson identified a certain kind of winter afternoon light that arrives without warning, altering something inside you that you cannot locate. There is no scar, she writes, only "internal difference / where the meanings are". It does not announce itself as important. It is, and then it is gone, and you are slightly different from how you were before it came. It is an experience that requires you to be still to even register it, which is to say: it seldom happens anymore. This essay is, in part, about why fermentation needs a sealed container, time in the dark, and the near-total absence of interference. What do we lose when we cannot give ourselves these conditions, and what may be possible when we can?

The Question Before the Answer

Rilke wrote his *Letters to a Young Poet* in 1903 to a nineteen-year-old who wanted to know whether he really was a poet. Rilke's answer, stretched across ten letters, was essentially: stop asking. Not dismissively, but endearingly, to suggest he understood that asking itself was the problem. "I would like to beg you," he implored, "to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves". Questions, he concluded, need time. They need to be sealed away and fermented, because under the pressure of quick declarations, identity forms like quick-rise bread—structurally sound, but lacking complexity and bland on the tongue. This, admittedly, is an uncomfortable position to occupy in a culture that has made early self-definition a virtue. The apparatus of university admissions and career counselling, fuelled by a logic of personal branding and the soft coercion of the LinkedIn profile, seeks to extract a legible self from you at the earliest possible opportunity. What do you want to be? What are you passionate about? Where do you see yourself in five years? These are important questions, but they demand an answer from you *now*, making them incompatible with the "fermentation of the self". Hannah Arendt, writing in *The Human Condition* (1958), argued that genuine thinking, which shifts your worldview, cannot happen while you are performing for an audience. The *vita activa*, the life of action and visibility, crowds out the *vita contemplativa*. The social sphere asks you to be legible and consistent in your behaviour, and yet thinking requires withdrawal from that (at least temporarily). When everyone else talks, demanding answers, you cannot hear yourself. The self that might have formed in the gaps of everyday living is relegated to a background thought, perhaps a frivolity for retirement after amassing a wealth that has come to define you above all else.

However, *vita contemplativa* has historically been the preserve of those who did not have to work; the ancient Greeks who philosophised at leisure did so because the enslaved handled everything else. "Love the questions", Rilke says, but this is easier counsel to follow with a financial cushion. The pressure to declare yourself early falls hardest on those for whom not knowing is an economic risk: capitalism has little patience for the unmonetised self. The person who cannot yet articulate their direction becomes a liability within this logic. Thus, an honest account of solitude has to acknowledge that the sealed container, in many cases, is a privilege. What follows, then, is not a prescription for everyone, but an attempt to understand what is lost when the conditions for slow growth are denied, and why a culture that denies them so systematically warrants questioning.

The Dissolved Backstage

Erving Goffman's account of social life as theatre shapes this problem in the modern context of online presence. In his framework, we always manage impressions and adjust our self-presentations in context; the backstage is the only space where performance is suspended, where the self exists without needing to be legible to anyone.[6] Solitude is

is Solitude that Space?

by Ananaya Mittal

the backstage made total, where an unformed self can exist without being called to account for its unformedness.

The problem is that social media has more or less dissolved the backstage. Performance is now continuous. Half-formed opinions and unresolved feelings once private are now content. And once you start narrating your interiority in real time for an audience, it stops being interior. The metaphorical jar is open, and nothing is fermenting. You no longer become, but produce. Bo Burnham, who had a very public reckoning with this on his show, put it plainly: "If you can live your life without an audience, do it". He said this as someone who could not. It is instructive that a generation effectively raised on YouTube found resonance in this line, confirming that in our surveillance-saturated lives, a desire for the backstage is real; the ability to actually inhabit it is another matter.

The going-analogue trend of the last few years can be read as an attempt to find this backstage. Sales of "dumb phones" (with limited features) rose 25% in Canada between 2022 and 2023, while 84% of German consumers aged 18 to 24 felt as if they use their phones too much.[2] Searches for "digital detox" more than tripled between 2023 and 2024.[3] People are reaching for the sealed jar, but are they necessarily sealing it? Despite going analogue, the aesthetic and content pipeline of the trend risks becoming performative, and to use Goffman's metaphor, relocates the backstage to the fore rather than sincerely restoring it.

The Room in Amherst

Emily Dickinson did not have this contemporary problem, but she understood the need to perform the timely duties of her Puritan time. Her solution? Literally shutting herself up in her room in Amherst, which, by any measure, was a very small world. In fact, she left it so infrequently that the town took to calling her "the myth of Amherst" whilst she was still alive.[4] She communicated largely by letter and published almost nothing during her lifetime. By the standards of any era, she was a catastrophic failure at rendering her interiority legible to an audience on any schedule.

Yet what formed inside that enclosure was cosmic and vast beyond measure. The nearly 1,800 poems found in a locked chest after her death are the record of what happens when a mind is given time in a sealed container and not asked to account for itself before it is ready. The poems were not written for publication; if anything, Dickinson was repulsed by the enterprise of publication, seeing it as "the auction of the mind of man". She wrote for the process, which, arguably, is what made them last.

Her letters to Susan Gilbert, her sister-in-law, operated as the intimate and experimental semi-backstage, shaped by a specific reader but not curated for the public, allowing her to try new things that would later appear in her poems in a more refined form.[5] The sealed room produced the fermentation; the letters were how she released pressure, on her own terms, to one person.

Productive versus Corrosive

Fermentation and rot are not easy to distinguish from inside the container. Both involve pressure and transformation in the dark. Both produce something unrecognisable from what went in. The pandemic forced this question into collective experience in ways that produced a belated clarity, enforcing a stillness that accelerated fermentation for some and allowed them to produce real work through a grounded sense of what truly mattered. For others, however, it tipped them into rot and isolation. The circumstances were identical, but the difference was internal. It hinged on whether one embraced their solitude.

After all, the productivity of solitude and the damage of isolation lie on the same spectrum, and the distance between them can be invisible until after one's escape from it. Rilke's Duino Elegies, written in bursts across a decade of intense enclosure, read like a mind that pushed the fermentation to its furthest extent. Dickinson's late poems have a similar quality, compressed to the point of fracture. The depth of these poems is inseparable from the pressure that produced them. Whether that pressure was sustainable is a different question (that neither of them was especially interested in answering), which we must confront in our contemporary existence, given ever-increasing interconnectedness and demand for availability.

WHAT IS THE WAITING FOR?

Fermentation insists on time—without interference, without urgency. The complexity that develops in a long ferment is not externally imposed, but emerges from within it, given the right conditions and enough time. This is antithetical to how self-knowledge is currently framed, where you *must* know what you want, what your passions are, and where you want to go now and express it in a form digestible to a committee or an algorithm. There is little patience to listen to how someone answers the question of becoming for it is expected that such an answer will be produced at the beck and call of anyone.

Rilke's actual advice to the young poet, beneath the patina of prose, was: do not perform the answer before it exists. Go inward, live the questions, let it ferment until it tells you what it is. This almost-impossible advice to follow makes it precisely why it's worth pondering. The most important things take the longest to become themselves. A sourdough starter that has been fed for years is not the same as one made last week. Depth comes from duration, and the duration requires a willingness to resist the demand to know and declare a self, a five-year plan, and to trust that, as Rilke puts it most reassuringly,

"LIFE HAS NOT FORGOTTEN YOU, IT HOLDS YOU IN ITS HAND; IT WILL NOT LET YOU FALL".

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AMONG ASHES

By Yeap Yew Jin Renee

It was on Monday—as weather stations reported over 50°C temperatures, seismologists warned of another 7.0-magnitude earthquake, and smoke from the growing wildfires enveloped homes across the country—that Lynn decided to bake her first loaf of bread.

In fear of scorching heat waves, the government had closed schools the week before and she had been immobile in bed ever since. She could feel the suffocating embrace of the pillow over her head. It smelt of sweat mingled with despair, what Lynn imagined the rest of the world also smelt like.

"Why don't we go shopping?" her older sister Angie had insisted.

"No thanks," Lynn's mumble was barely audible from under the pillow.

About 15 years ago, the government had started constructing cooling tunnels to get to places like shopping centres, but they were claustrophobic, eternally crowded and—in Lynn's opinion—had terrible *feng shui.*

As such, Lynn continued to stew in her supine state, morosely scrolling through her social media feeds when she came across a bread-making video. The voiceover was incredibly calming... *Add the yeast to a warm bowl of water and allow it to bloom*. Lynn watched as tiny, beige specks disappeared within the water, making way for delicate, cloud-like blobs to resurface, blooming one-by-one like the individual buds on an inflorescence.

It was unexpectedly beautiful and soothing, like a balm pressed to heated skin. Within minutes, Lynn found herself in the kitchen, unearthing a long-forgotten mixer from a cabinet.

"Do we have any flour? And yeast?" she called out towards the living room.

"Third drawer!" A yell came from the sofas.

Lynn smiled. Even without looking, she knew that her mother had been comfortably lounging on the couch, watching re-runs of her favourite dramas. They had not made any new dramas in recent years. A "non-essential service", Lynn supposed.

"You're *finally* out of bed?" Angie teased as she entered the kitchen.

"I'm making bread," Lynn gestured to the ingredients on the counter. "Come and watch the yeast bloom. Yeast needs to release carbon dioxide for the bread to rise, so you first add warm water to check that it's alive."

"By the way, did you see the news?" Angie asked as Lynn stirred a packet of yeast into a bowl of water using chopsticks. "The new Prime Minister just approved that plan to stop the wildfires."

"Yeah, I'm glad. I guess we all need to make a move. The world won't stop just because we do."

Angie came over to her side and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Together, they watched the little beige clouds blossoming in the bowl, shyly at first, then gaining momentum, eager to grow in this new, warm world.

Things will get better, thought Lynn.

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"Temperatures today have hit another record-high of 60°C in the east. Those unable to access air conditioning are to report to the nearest shelter and apply for a temporary stay," came a voice from the living room TV.

"Turn the TV off, mom!" Lynn shouted from the kitchen.

"It's important to know what's going on!" her mother rebuked from the living room.

"Your mom's right. Just don't get too bothered by what you hear," her father reasoned, patting her shoulder.

But how could Lynn not be bothered? Every piece of bad news was a reminder of how undeniably powerless she was.

"How's your bread going today?" Angie interjected, hoping to change the topic.

It was Thursday, and Lynn had three failed attempts behind her — sour-tasting, burnt, and too dense to be called bread. Not a single loaf had been wasted though, for her family was determined to finish each one.

"It's alright," Lynn muttered, too focused on weighing the flour to reply properly. "Dad, you didn't get the bread flour."

"Sorry, just use the flour we have in the cupboard."

"I can't! The bread won't come out right," Lynn snapped.

"Alright, no need to get upset. What's the difference, anyway?"

"Bread flour has higher protein content, so more gluten will form and the bread will be chewier. If there's just one ingredient that's wrong, everything goes wrong," Lynn grumbled.

"High stakes," Angie observed.

Hearing the phrase brought Lynn back to a year ago. Her teacher had reprimanded her for scoring badly on the finals.

"Grades aren't just letters on your report card. They reflect your character; who you are. You want to make a difference in the world? You'll need resilience. Discipline. Consistency. Don't forget, we live in a place of high stakes."

Snapping back to reality, Lynn knew she had to get the bread right. In a world so fragile and unyielding, the bread was the one thing she could mould and shape with her own two hands.

In the background, she heard the TV again, "The recently-approved government project to block the spread of wildfires has hit some major setbacks, with key figures pulling out. This comes as a major blow as the fires on the east side of the country continue to spread and are projected to hit residential areas in the coming month."

Her hands shaking, Lynn tipped the bloomed yeast mixture into the flour.

***

Lynn could hear the sounds of sirens from outside. The last time she heard them, she was about five years old. The sunrays were searing, but she wanted to go out and play. Staying inside was suffocating. Then the sirens had sounded and her mom had hastily carried her off to a shelter. When she was a bit older, she learnt what the sirens meant—serious imminent disaster.

"Lynn!" Angie pleaded with her in the kitchen. "We have to go *now*."

The fires had spread faster than expected, possibly due to changing winds. But as Lynn pushed the bread into the oven, she found that she could hardly care about anything else.

Her thoughts raced back towards the video she had watched. *Before putting the bread in the oven, allow the dough to rise a final time. This step is important as yeast dies in the oven at around 50°C.* The heat would creep up on the yeast, their proteins would denature and their tiny cells would fall apart. So, she could not leave the kitchen just yet. Otherwise, what would all those yeast cells die for? What was all her effort for?

Just as she slammed the oven door shut, her frantic parents rushed in. Together with Angie, they dragged Lynn out of the kitchen by each arm.

After climbing down an endless flight of stairs, they ran in the direction of a shelter. Not too far off, Lynn saw a huge wall of flames. She had not realised how close the fire had been. Had she stayed in the kitchen just a bit longer, her entire family could have been killed. The air around them was swelteringly hot, but her hands felt ice-cold.

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In the underground shelter, Lynn huddled close to her family. They were one of the many within the large concrete room, where neighbours who seldom talked now shared tears and unspoken fears.

Lynn stared at the LED lights above, which casted a pale, sickly glow on everything. She could still hear the artificial, rhythmic wails of the sirens from outside, echoing against the walls of her heart. She wondered if there was anyone still outside, fighting for their lives.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her mother, who scolded her with tears in her eyes, "You were being very irresponsible, Lynn." She was right, Lynn knew.

Robotic food trolleys were going around the room, stopping to offer people wrapped sandwiches. With a small "thank you" to the food trolley, Lynn took a few and passed them around to her parents and sister.

They sat in a circle, nibbling on their sandwiches in silence.

"It's a miracle, but my bread might just be better than this," Lynn suddenly remarked.

She had hoped to lighten the mood, but she instantly regretted saying it.

Yet to her surprise, Angie choked out a laugh. Soon, they were all trying to stifle their laughter, receiving a concerned look from the people around them. The heaviness in Lynn's heart instantly diffused, like a window opening in a room full of smoke.

As she looked at her parents and sister, she remembered the last time she had felt this relieved. It was the day her teacher had scolded her and she was crying in the corner of her room, feeling utterly worthless. Then her family had come to sit together with her, just like they were now.

"Lynn, after we get out of here, we'll go see what happened to your bread, alright?" said Angie.

"It's okay, we can just bake another one together," said Lynn, smiling at her sister and then her parents. "Even if it turns out lumpy or funny-looking, it doesn't matter. I've been so caught up in whether I could make the perfect loaf that I forgot how beautiful the yeast was as it bloomed. Tiny cells working together to shape their chaotic world."

In the beginning, according to some members of the *Homo sapiens* species, God had created the heavens and the earth. Some others suggested a large explosion instead. The world might have formed from a giant's body. Risen from primordial chaos. Sprung from an egg. There were many theories and, until the very end, there had been much argument about how the world had begun.

There was, however, no debate about how the world ended. This was largely due to how there was nobody left to argue about it.

After the end of the world, a definitive echo of silence rings. *This has been the end*, it says. *Nothing more will come after this*, it suggests. The air is so thick with the fragments of the world upended that it is entirely still for a moment. Then, the ground begins to quake, thrumming with aftershocks. The air begins to move again, like a breath released.

Miniscule specks of something and simultaneously nothing waft through the air, bumping and colliding and clumping together. They drift slowly down, settling into the cracks between larger, equally unrealised fragments. The world begins to coalesce back together, anchoring to a single gravitational point in the same way a star is born, drawing fragments into itself in the way that a star dies.

As the dust begins to settle, what is left of the world returns to view: an amalgamation of concrete and metal that might have once been buildings, buried under hills of unidentifiable debris, cut through by deep gorges where heavier pieces must have fallen. Nothing will move for a long time.

Even as grey light begins to seep through the drifting ash, washing everything out, the initial heat of the end gives way to cold—the temperature plummets. Water molecules begin to settle on a shred of plastic resting on the ground, clumping into steadily growing droplets. When the droplets touch, they merge into a fat speck of liquid, slowly gaining weight until it begins to slip down the side, rolling into others along the way and picking up speed until a drop becomes a trickle becomes a stream.

The stream of water makes its way through the rubble, gradually seeping through the concrete to the long-forgotten organic matter below. As it spreads, something long-slumbering in the dirt stirs. Buried deep in the detritus, a microbe so tiny that it must have been overlooked by the end of the world begins to feast. It secretes enzymes as it goes, wriggling in the dirt, triggering an influx of nutrients that recruits other microbial friends who leak ammonia and other substances, pungent and alkaline enough for more things lodged in the dirt to wake.

Together, they proliferate, and the world begins to rot.

Observations After the END OF THE WORLD

It had taken the earth billions of years to develop, though nobody had been counting for most of it. Now, time, as understood by the precise scale of seconds and minutes and hours, means nothing again. As the concrete begins to crumble, jagged edges worn smooth by the wind, time passes nonetheless.

From a damp, decaying valley, a cautious tendril creeps across the ground. Another tendril follows, slithering in the opposite direction, strikingly yellow against the residual grey of the world. Near the surface, scattered among the debris, the dirt is equal parts soil, equal parts concrete pebbles, polypropylene shards, and forgotten dreams. The tendrils pulse against the rot, probing and searching, drawn forward by microscopic chemical receptors in its membrane that say, this way.

A tendril latches onto a shard of polypropylene, made porous after the microbes' attempts to turn it to detritus. A thin fluid, rich in enzymes and other chemicals, begins to leak from the thread-thin filaments, softening the plastic into something squishy, moldable, and the mycelium sinks its ravenous hyphae in—there may yet be something of worth in this.

The fungus feasts until it fruits, blisters of soft, round bodies welling up in the dirt. When the wind picks up, they come into full bloom and rupture, leaving pockmarks in the ground as they release spores that cloud the air, mixing with the leftover dust of a long forgotten civilization. Together, old dreams and something new are swept to faraway places, laying the bed for others to thrive where they settle.

Time drips ever slowly, ever steadily on, measurable by the minerals left behind by the trickling water that bud into the beginnings of stalactites. Where moisture goes, the mould follows; every forgotten fragment and every stale surface provides a niche, a new home for a different variety until it has nowhere else to grow but on top of itself.

Along the shadows, by what might have once been a wall, or a piece of the floor upended, something moves a little faster. A cockroach scuttles in the darkness, moving from crevice to crevice in search for a suitable niche, its long antennae dragging parallel indentations in the soft, wet mould that now coats the world as a second skin.

She clings low to the ground, mindful of the egg case emerging from the tip of her abdomen where her nymphs squirm within, pressing against the seam of their ootheca. There isn't much time left.

All around her, the world holds its breath.

She moves slowly, heavy with new life.

A/N: We live in the Anthropocene—the "human" geological age—named after humanity's outsized impact on the planet. However, hasn't COVID-19 proven that a single, well-timed microbe could send society into disarray? Hasn't it revealed how limited our control truly is, and how equal of a role other (non-)living beings play in shaping our planet?

Observations invites us to consider that life did not begin—and likely will not end—with humanity. Desolate landscapes by human standards may teem with opportunity for non-human communities. While many of us (myself included!) see mould and cockroaches as revolting, persistent fixtures of urban life which we wish would disappear, it is in their persistence in "uninhabitable" conditions where hope lives on.

By
Netanya Tham

From My Mother's Hands

By Lea Nisha Quah



i. Activation

I came into this world with my
mother.
She carried me when her own mother
was still carrying her,
Three generations bound together,
A Russian doll of bone and blood.

It's inside of you, they say.
An instinct that lies dormant,
Patient and quiet,
Until the flowers bloom

ii. Fermentation

She filled our home with
Laughter and light,
Love seeping into every meal.
She kept her tears and fears hidden
away
In places we couldn't reach.

We happily ate from her hands,
The same ones that
Bled, burnt, and blistered.

iii. Release

She was a matriarchal martyr,
Pushing us to our potential
Till the very end.
Bracing herself against the heat,
To give one last hug,
Shaping us to our final form.

I still see her now,
In the way I talk,
The way I smile, and
The way I love.

My mother carried me into this world,
And I leave it carrying her inside me.

And the day came
when the risk to
remain tight in a
bud was more
painful than the
risk it took to
blossom.

Anaïs Nin




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