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By Anne Applebaum

The Atlantic

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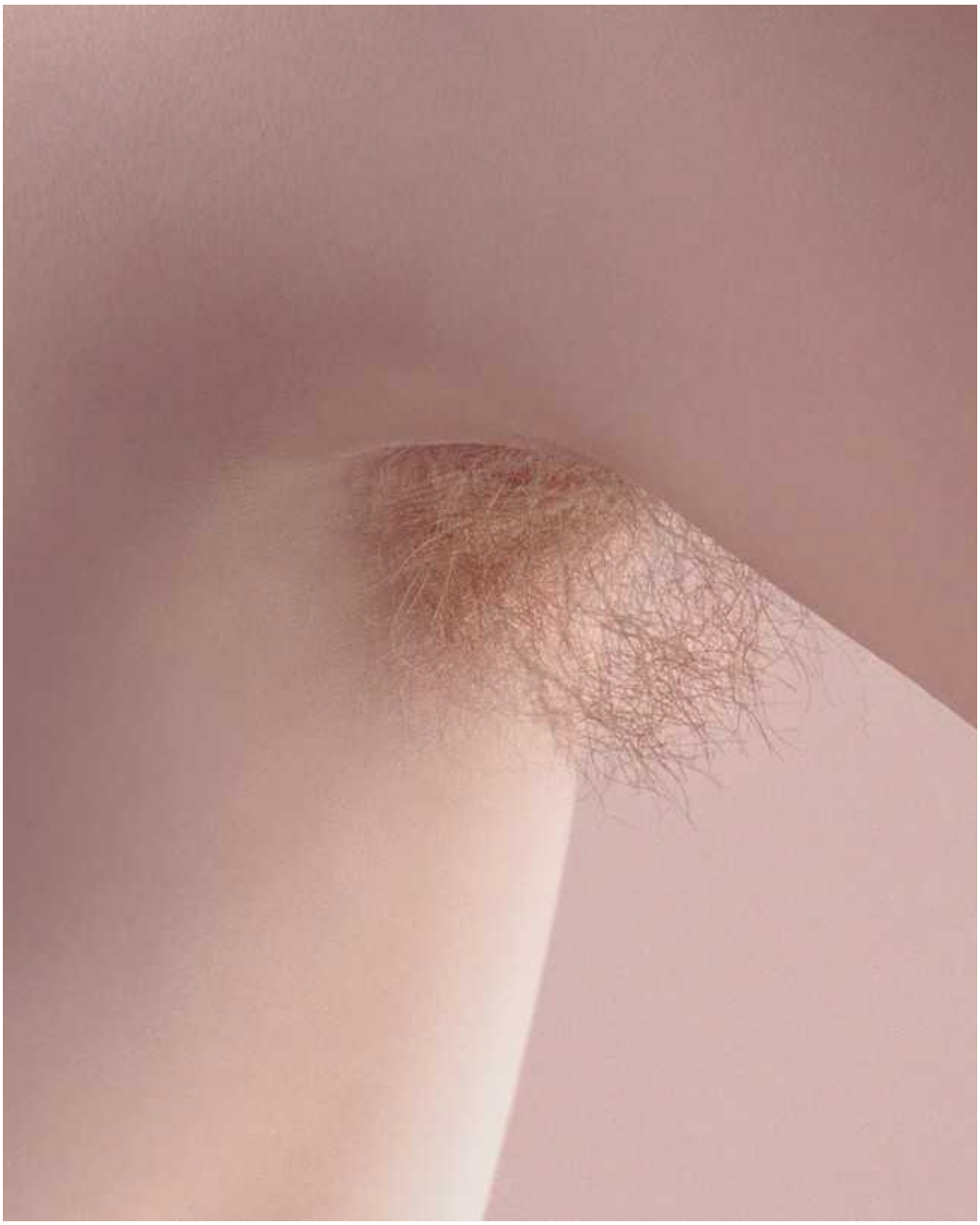

The Armpits of White Boys

hurmat kazmi: The Armpits of White Boys

By hurmat kazmi

During the predeparture orientation at the crumbling three-star hotel by the sea—with its white portico and its lobbies smelling like a Native Jetty swamp—the exchange student is warned about a number of things. Ex-exchange students—by now so Americanized, you would think they had spent their entire lives in the U.S.—regale him with anecdotes both funny and scary: host fathers casually dropping the bass during dinner-table conversations, and host mothers quietly letting one or two rather pungent ones slip during walks in the park; host fathers letting their hands hover too close to the breasts and buttocks of their host daughters, and host mothers soliciting bare-bodied massages from their host sons.

In Washington, D.C., where he arrives in August along with all the other exchange students from his home country, he has another set of orientations. Exchange students get a monthly stipend of $125 from the State Department. The host families report to the local coordinator, the local coordinator to the regional coordinator, the regional coordinator to the national coordinator, and the national coordinator communicates directly with the State Department—a chain of command through which news of discontent or concern ascends like an elevator. The prime warning here is loud and clear: Be rude to your host family and you'll be thrown out of their house, put up for adoption by another host family; get caught drinking, doing drugs, shoplifting, impregnating someone, planning to flee or overstay, and you'll be sent back home.

It is the first time that the exchange student has fully escaped his family's supervision, and although the temptation to hook up here—to give himself to another exchange student—is immense, and although the hotel rooms allow for such opportunities, he has that warning tucked securely in his mind. His days in D.C. are marked by strict celibacy. After four days in and out of orientations, sightseeing around the big, historic city, he boards a flight to his assigned state for a school year of cultural and academic exchange.

He gets lucky with his placement: Visalia, California, middle-aged host parents. He is aware that many exchange students get sent to remote nooks in Iowa or Kentucky; he is also aware that many exchange students get

stuck with elderly couples looking for company after their own kids stop bringing their families around for Christmas with the grandparents.

On his first night, he anxiously eats a single slice of pizza for dinner. He is disappointed by his room initially, small and plain, devoid of character. Despite his disappointment, he lays out on the bed all the gifts he has brought from back home: embroidered Sindhi hand-fans studded with golden beads; a small, hand-painted rickshaw figurine; packets of Laziza kheer and Shan korma masala; kundan bangles for his host mother; a white kurta for his host father.

His host mother is a stay-at-home mom to two kids, a 4-year-old boy and 2-year-old girl, and his host father is a sergeant with the City of Visalia Police Department. They live in an ordinary house on an ordinary street, not unlike the ones he has grown up seeing in American movies. His host mother is all safari shorts and spaghetti-strap tops, baseball caps and mineral sunscreen. Her freckles change color under variations of light. She is about the yard-sales-and-Costco-membership life. She uses phrases like "none'ya business" and "alrighta-Idaho-potato," and is all about holding hands and saying grace before every meal. His host father is a big guy, a regular guy, unhandsome in a way that suggests he has never been handsome—thin lips, cheeks like a hairy fruit. He is mostly away at work and mows the lawn and rakes the leaves when he is home. He says things like "funk up my trunk" and "drop a deuce." His host siblings are small: nubby shoulders and jutting knees, ribbons of coagulated snot in their snub noses. The brother is boisterous arms and a screaming mouth, smelling of the sweet rot of Jell-O and Go-Gurts; the sister is a fat, white fermented dough waiting to rise, smelling of soiled diapers, rash cream, and no-tears shampoo.

The exchange student surprises himself by not getting homesick. He doesn't miss Pakistan, or his family. He is in awe of his hosts, astounded that they've allowed a stranger—from a whole other country, no less—such uninhibited access to their house, to their lives, for 10 months. His family back home has barely any patience with external intrusions—relatives, guests, house-helps, even his sisters' children.

For the exchange student, school is a maze, a confusing colosseum. A boy, his first-day "buddy," takes him around and shows him his classes, the gym,

the cafeteria. A girl in his U.S.-history class offers him a dented Tootsie Roll, to "introduce you to American candy." The kids in his debate class ask him questions about Pakistan, about terrorism and homemade grenades and Osama bin Laden.

At home, when he has settled into the family well enough to not feel awkward calling his host mother Mom and his host father Dad, his host mother asks him if the bangles his mother has sent for her are expensive and whether she should put them on their family insurance plan. The bangles are cheap, fake gold, purchased from Liaquat Market, he knows, but he pretends to be clueless, says that he will ask his mother when he speaks with her next. He tells his mother that his host family loved all the gifts. Each time he thinks about the bangles, he pictures his mother in the sweltering Karachi heat, bent over a dilapidated kiosk in Liaquat Market—her kamdani chador clinging to her damp back—haggling furiously, excited to buy presents for his new family in America. He avoids the subject with his host mother, but she eventually brings it up herself. "Don't ask your mother about the bangles," she says with a pitying smile. "I don't want her to get embarrassed."

Embarrassed on his mother's behalf, he feels a lump in his throat, a sensation that returns during a mild altercation about coffee creamers. He starts drinking coffee—real coffee, made in a coffee machine, with ground beans, and not the stupid instant coffee that he is used to drinking back home—and to soften the edges of the bitterness that jabs the corners of his mouth, he pours in half a cup of creamer. For a few days his host mother lets it slide, allowing him to unabashedly splash his coffee with caramel, hazelnut, toffee, pumpkin spice, and French vanilla. Then, one day: "Coffee creamers are expensive," she says in a tone that takes him by surprise, a tone laced with anger. "You cannot keep doing that. Use milk, or don't drink coffee."

By October, from the pictures other exchange students post on Facebook, he gathers that snow has begun to fall in some parts of America, but the heat doesn't relent in dry, sandy Visalia. At school, boys continue to wear tank tops, shorts, and flip-flops—yet another cultural shock for him, the school's lack of a uniform code making him feel like a guest, not a student. What

shocks him more are the armpits of these boys: unshaved, thick hair shimmering with sweat, flattened to swirls on their skin. He averts his eyes from the exposed armpits almost as quickly as he does when he sees anyone making out in public, which is something he was warned during the orientations never to stare at. Eventually, out of curiosity if not desire, the armpits of these boys become a bizarre receptacle for his attention.

He notices that there is hair in the armpits of boys who do not even shave yet, boys still in the throes of puberty. Turfs, scant and abundant, black, brown, and golden, muddled with tiny white crumbs of deodorant, like snow caught in foliage if they use the white, powdery kind, or matted flat and wet-looking if they use gel. He notices the intricate web of wrinkles around the edges of their pits when they hold their arms too close to their bodies. He hears the susurration of wind passing through the abyss between a raised arm and a torso. He wants to bury his face under their arms and smell them all.

At home, too, he notices his host father taking a plunge into the swimming pool, arms raised over his head to form an inverted *V*. The cords of his triceps snap, and the tender skin under the arms dips to form a cavity, ripe with two tracks of hair, dark-black and disorderly. His host siblings are too young to have any body hair at all; they are shiny and smooth like mannequins.

He has a hard time making friends at school. The girl who offered him candy does not speak to him again; his "buddy" does not recognize him in the hallways, does not return his smiles or nods. His only friends are other exchange students from Croatia, Senegal, and Indonesia.

Thankfully, he does not allow the early rifts with his host mother to convince him that his time with his loving American host family will be unpleasant, and in fact, soon enough, in his host mother he finds one of his closest friends in Visalia. She takes him along on every trip to the supermarket (she prefers WinCo over Vons and Shasta Cola over Coke; both choices save her money) and takes him to her loquacious hairdresser, who gives him a Justin Bieber hairdo with blue streaks. With parents, host or otherwise, he cannot be close to both, so he chooses sides, plays favorites. He is devoted to his host mother, and without protest, his host

father recedes into the background, emerging every now and then to take him to a lake or to watch a bicycle race.

His host mother, too, he notices, lacks friends—her days are chores-oriented; she keeps the house immaculate and cooks uncomplex but delicious meals. Or if she has friends, she does not invite them over for kiddie parties and brunches, or speak with them for hours on the phone; or if she does any of that, she does it while he is away at school. Sometimes he returns home to find her napping in the middle of the day, errands behind her, nothing else to do.

His host mother is the coolest person he has ever met. The two of them talk over dinner, post-dinner, while putting the kids to bed, late into the evening. They end the day with a sweet "Goodnight," picking up the conversation the next day exactly where they left off. They buttress each conversation about the present with anecdotes about the past, filling each other in on the parts of their lives the other has missed: siblings' weddings, vacations, deaths in the family. They fall into a daily routine. He tells her each and every thing that happens each and every day at school; so what if one day she says—when he tells her about the boy who, during the first numismatics-club meeting, seeing the blue streaks in his hair and the skinny jeans hugging his skinny legs, walked up to him and volunteered the fact that he is gay—"Ugh, stay away from him."

In December, the central heating is turned on too high and he lies in bed naked, a thin throw blanket draped over half of his body. After an entire day of wearing a jacket, a feral, fermented scent rests in his armpits. He rubs his nose on the papery edge of one and sniffs. He imagines that the smell emanating from his armpit belongs to a white boy. He thinks about their bare, milky limbs coruscated with golden hair and ears pierced with diamond studs, their perilously sagging jeans and exposed boxer briefs. He thinks about standing close to them and inhaling their tangy white-boy breath and the antiseptic fumes of cheap aerosol sprays masking their sweet boy smells. The hardness between his legs makes its presence felt. He touches himself.

He thinks about how the white boys carry triumphant gains in their arms and shoulders, the bulks of their chests, flaunting their physicality. How

some of them wear tank tops and even in profile you can see the geometry of their hard abs, the plush palimpsest of hair on their navels. He thinks about the nebulous glow of their skin, about how the faintest trace of hair on their Adam's apple catches the light in the sun, how a lone bead of sweat dangles for dear life from the bristles on their chins. They always smell so clean that he imagines God softened their flesh with laundry detergent.

Then he thinks of fathers back home, pressing razors into their sons' palms after Friday prayer, after the sermon in the mosque, the shrill voice of the maulvi echoing in his ears. *Cleanliness is half the faith.* He hears the hushed tones of fathers whispering to their sons, instructing them to cut—to a size smaller than a grain of rice—the hair in their armpits and above their members; to follow the Sunnah, the lifestyle of the Prophet. He imagines all of these scenarios in his head because his own father has never had such a conversation with him, never pressed a sharp razor into his soft palm. These are scraps of information he has picked up from boys around him, in school and in his family.

He folds his arms behind his head to look at the skin of his armpits, razed to the texture of sandpaper, each pore agitated and red. Soaped and scraped, soaped and scraped, ardently scratched with a razor every week, the sharpness tingling long afterward. And before he was big enough to hold a razor, he remembers how his mother used to strip his armpits clean with homemade wax. How she stood him in front of the mirror to show him how the wax had to be heated on a steel plate that had been blackened over the stove, and then a stick, usually from a leftover ice pop, had to be dipped into the hot, gluey wax, which was then immediately smeared in an even sheet over the hair. His mother taught him to wait and blow gently on the wax, let it harden and shrink and tug on the skin, and then to pull, always in a single direction, and always quickly. Sometimes the pain made his eyes water and sometimes little ellipses of blood formed on the broken skin. And sometimes, even worse, especially when he started waxing his own pits, he tugged too hard, or too slowly, or in the wrong direction, causing a violent breaking of a hair or two—causing within a week the problematic hairs to grow inward when they returned, causing boils to emerge in his pits, boils that grew and grew until they waged war against the tensile strength of his skin, and the skin eventually gave way, causing the boils to burst open,

oozing pus before becoming small again, disappearing over time, leaving behind shriveled dark spots and congealed skin. Days later, hair would appear in his armpits again, tiny and prickly, like the heads of toothpicks in a jar.

He looks at the mutilated pores in his armpits and wonders, *This is what they come out of, the hairs?* The pores are, he thinks, tiny portals—the birthplace of hair. *And what is inside?* he wonders. Long spools of hair coiled and resting under the warm skin? Coils of hair unwinding themselves every week and squeezing out of the sievelike membrane of skin? He imagines covering the pores up with tape or glue, or better still with cement, so he never has to shave again. And then it hits him, the jubilant realization that here, in this place, he really doesn't have to.

Half of his time in America has passed, and yet each time he visits a grocery store with his host mother, he experiences afresh the joy of seeing all things familiar and unfamiliar. Every time he purchases Aquafresh

toothpaste, St. Ives body wash, and Clinique moisturizers, he feels like he has moved up in life. Yes, these products are available back home too, but in large, shiny marts frequented by the rich, where each time he goes, just to lurk, he is trailed by store clerks, their suspicion barely masked by their eagerness to offer advice and answer questions. Everything tastes different here, though. Pineapples are hard and dry; mangoes are sweet ghosts of themselves, sold in a box or a can, dipped in cancerous syrups. Milk is not delivered by a fat man on a scooter every morning at the break of dawn but pulled down in cool bottles from pristine shelves. It does not smell of the warm, febrile belly of the cow. It smells of nothing and tastes like chalk.

On nights when his host father is away at work, he and his host mother—after putting the kids to bed and cleaning up the mess of swimming-pool noodles and dismembered limbs of toys—watch TV late into the night. *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*—they love these shows. There was a time in his life, around when the Bollywood film *Fashion* came out, when he grew obsessed with the idea of becoming a dress designer. His family found him one day—tangled in fabric that he had taken from his sisters' creaky closet, face made up like a Barbie's—and the successive name-calling, shaming, and blackmailing eventually subdued his interests; but as he sits down to watch these shows with his host mother, a rekindling occurs in his heart. He finds himself unable to speak, the words slipping further and further away from him after his host mother says—as he comments one night on how talented the men on the show are, how beautiful the dresses they design on such short notice, using such scant materials—"If they can be called men at all."

Undoubtedly his host mother knows what he is, they both know, but he is scared to say it. He does not have words yet to argue about or explain how he feels to his host mother—the shape of his hurt remains unknown to him—so he argues with her about milder things: petty arguments about his chores and about spending more time on Facebook than with the family. When he tells his host mother it's sunny outside and he wants to tan—and she says that he already has really dark skin and doesn't need to—he says she is being racist. When she yells and flings things in the air, he locks himself in the bathroom and pretends to cry. The State Department issues him its first disciplinary warning.

For his 16th birthday in March, his host family takes him to Vegas, a city he has expressed a desire to see ever since he arrived. They don't do much there other than walk up and down the strip, in and out of hotels, but it is the best birthday of his life. During the last ride from the strip to the hotel, he gets into the cab and murmurs—under his breath so the driver doesn't hear, in a voice full of mock amusement—"So now, where are you from?" Thinking that he is making fun of his host father for being nice and conversing with the cab drivers (when he's simply remarking on the fact that in the two days in Vegas, every single cab driver has been a non-American, from Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Bosnia, or Ukraine, speaking accented English, just as he does), his host mother scolds him in front of everyone, lecturing him on the American values of politeness and kindness.

A few months have passed since he last shaved his armpits. The hair has exposed its unseen potential, growing longer and longer every month. Though he should be sickened, he is delighted to find, post-shower, the solvent smell of fresh sweat beneath his arms, his pits mildly sticky like a Post-it pressed and plucked too many times. In his more daring moments, he steps outside the house wearing tank tops recently purchased from Target. He finds excuses to expose his armpits, to show the world his new, benign development. He scratches the back of his neck to rid himself of a nonexistent itch; he reaches for the top shelf in the library to grab a book that he replaces seconds later. He is fascinated by how the barest puff of air provokes the hair in his pits into motion, flickering like a hundred candlewicks. How devoid of shame this ostentatious display of virility, how lacking in grace. How beautiful.

The applications arrive for the next year's crop of exchange students and are sent to the current host families, neatly plastic-coated. His host family goes through all the forms, asking his opinion on each applicant. His host parents decide not to host next year. They want to take a break, they say. He feels two things simultaneously: A part of him is happy that for a while, he will be their only exchange-child experience, and a part of him feels he has let them down so much that they will never want to host again.

Several months later, when he is back in Karachi, he will learn that in the end they did decide to host another exchange student, from Senegal, and a

year later he will learn that they decided to adopt him, to keep him forever. They will announce it on Facebook, *our new son*, and set up a GoFundMe to pay for his college education. They will make him a permanent member of their family, just as he had imagined they would—but didn't—make him.

As spring arrives, his host parents go out together—to an annual police officers' dinner—which is something they do not do often. His host mother's sister, the one who lives in Fresno, comes over to babysit the kids, along with her hot jock of a husband and their son. When his host parents leave, she invites her half brother and his girlfriend over too. He sits talking to these people, telling them, yes, he is from Pakistan; no, that's not in Saudi Arabia; yes, he is a Muslim; and no, he doesn't speak Islam. The girlfriend is especially impressed by the exchange student's school newspaper, which has recently published a heavily plagiarized feature he has written. Eventually, boredom stalks the gathering. Smiles are exchanged. A bottle of wine is produced. Passed around and gulped down. Another bottle. It is not his first time drinking alcohol—he has been stealing vodka and rum from the pantry throughout the year, mixing it with orange and cranberry juice—but he says that it is. This fascinates the group, and they fill his glass again and again. His host siblings sleep in their room peacefully, soundlessly, but when his host parents return home to a party of half-passed-out babysitters, their yelling wakes them up.

Later, when his host father's younger brother is getting married, his host parents let him drink under their supervision. They don't seem to notice that he gets drunk out of his mind. In the privacy of the bathroom, where he runs to throw up, he thinks to himself, *Now I am drunk and should act like a drunk person*. Drawing on images of drunk people—mostly from Indian movies and TV shows, because he has never seen a drunk person in his life in Pakistan—he begins to sway and stagger and slur his speech, much for his own amusement, but more for the drunken girls in short, shiny, sequined dresses, who call him cute and take selfies with him on their iPhones. When he is no longer able to walk or even stand, his host father carries him to his room and puts him to bed. For years he will replay this memory in his head again and again, trying to conjure the exact image of his host father lovingly planting a kiss on his forehead and covering him up with crisp white sheets and whispering, "Goodnight, son." He will remember, too,

how minutes later, he purposely rolled off the bed, just to be held again and be put back in by his host father.

“Grounded and phone is taken away”: He uploads a status on Facebook several weeks later, using the small laptop his host parents have loaned him for schoolwork. As he had hoped, his host mother comes out of her room, into the living room, where he is sleeping—his own room is occupied by his host father’s parents, who are visiting. “Give me the laptop,” she whisper-yells. “Now.” His phone has already been confiscated, all his messages on it, conversations with the boys he has pursued at school—to no avail—and the phone has no lock. He shuts the laptop and hands it to her.

She will, of course, read all his chats—with the boy in his Spanish class, with the one who is a peer tutor, and with the one he met at a debate tournament. Later, she will confront him not about the risqué messages to these boys, but about the fact that he lied to one of them, told him that during his visit to Las Vegas, his host family had taken him to a Dev concert, and also to the VMAs, where he had seen Taylor Swift perform live, all of which showed that he was ungrateful and did not fully appreciate what his host family had actually done for him.

After a few days, his host father takes him out for coffee, tells the exchange student that they love him very much, but if he continues to disrespect his wife, they will have no choice but to ask him to leave their home.

It’s May—one month to go. The thought of leaving crushes him. Despite the fights with his host mother, there is no place else he would rather be. He feels bad about not missing his family, his real family back home, his sisters, his father, his mother—especially his mother—who has torn her clothes to dress him, has flung pieces of meat from her plate onto his. His mother whom he loves but has never spoken with the way he speaks with his host mother: endlessly, ’til he runs out of breath. Sometimes in the middle of the night he wakes up from nightmares—he dreams that he is already back home, in Pakistan. His body breaks out in a cold sweat and his armpits, now so full of hair, are clammy.

His fights with his host mother become more frequent, more virulent. He has figured out ways to hurt her, and he finds it thrilling to watch her face

dissolve in a mix of anger and sadness. Calling her “Host Mom” does the trick. Telling her that he is not interested in going to family events and wants to focus on community service—so he can get that certificate from the White House, signed by Obama—works too. So does eating a snack as soon as he gets home from school, and then, at the dinner table, telling her he is no longer hungry for the meal she has spent a lot of time preparing. Some days he does not understand why he pushes her buttons. His host mother sings Lady Gaga with him. She puts together his costumes for the spring-fling week at school. She passes down Aveeno skin-care products for his cystic acne. She trusts him to take care of the kids while she does quick errands. She tells him that as a teenager she was very rebellious and belligerent—getting suspended from school, bringing back bad boys, calling her mother a bitch, etc. Some days the exchange student wonders if he has been karmically brought into her life, to give her a taste of her own medicine. Despite the ceaseless chatter, he never feels truly seen or accepted by her. Isn’t half-formed love what he’s received all his life?

On the night of his graduation, as a surprise for him, his host mother cooks chicken korma using the spices he has brought from home. His local coordinator and a few other exchange students, and his host mother’s sister and her hot jock of a husband and their son and his host father’s brother and his newlywed wife and their unborn child, are invited. When he comes home from the graduation ceremony, he is greeted by the smell of garam masala and for a second, he thinks his mother has come all the way from Karachi to cook dinner for him. Before he sits down to eat, his host mother grabs him by the arm, drags him to his room, to the dresser in the corner, on the shiny surface of which he had left, while rushing to get ready for the graduation ceremony, the clippings of his fingernails. Their ragged edges streaked with black dirt stare at him. “Do not do this ever again,” she says, her eyes aglimmer with fury. “I almost threw up.” Then, she leads him back out and smiles at the guests. He feels ashamed, his hunger replaced by sadness. Later at night, crying in his bed, he thinks that he did not even ask her what she was doing in his room, and then he remembers that it isn’t his room at all.

One week before he is to officially return home, he is asked to leave. The reason for the argument with his host mother is irrelevant, as it always is.

They are hurtling along Church Street at high speed to the Hair Mania for what will be his final haircut in America; tumbleweeds hurl themselves in their way with a suicidal ambition. The steering wheel is slapped; words like *fuck* and *goddammit* fly from his host mother's mouth. He—sensing that he has set in motion something that cannot be reversed—clutches his breath. The warm June sun shines in his eyes.

His local coordinator comes to pick him up from the salon, not his host mother, and he knows what this means. On the ride home, his neck and back itch, chopped hair clinging to the damp skin. His host mother is waiting for him at the door, the cordless phone in her hand, host father on the line. After a preamble about his disappointment and hurt, the father says, "I will have to ask you to leave our house," and though he has expected this, he allows himself to be shocked by the dictate. He falls to the ground, cries.

"I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry," he says now to whoever will listen to him: his host mother, who averts her eyes; his local coordinator, who shrugs; the elder of the two host siblings, who watches with wide-eyed horror, and the younger girl, who puts her foot in her mouth. "Pack whatever you can," his local coordinator says. She will send for the rest later.

At his local coordinator's parents' house, he will occupy an empty room until his future is decided by the national coordinator. He sleeps in a foreign bed all over again. Outside the window, an unfamiliar street, with identical cream- and beige-colored houses; the moon is full, and full of scars.

In the morning, post-shower, post-breakfast, his local coordinator calls. She speaks in a low, mournful voice. "Yeah, dude, sorry, we are putting you on a flight back home tomorrow." There is a silence, because he doesn't know what to say, what to do with his voice. Then there is laughter, a thigh being slapped. "I am kidding, dude, relax. You'll go home after a week, with everyone else. As planned." Relief spreads; his eyes fill with tears. A knot loosens somewhere inside of him. "Your dad will come to pick you up tomorrow afternoon." The muscle of his heart unfurls. But then: "No, they are not taking you back in." A pause. "For, like, a last family meeting. To talk."

The next day his host father runs late but eventually comes to pick him up. While he is not exactly hostile, he is not cordial either. His host father asks if he is hungry, if he has eaten. The exchange student explains his lack of hunger. “Anxiety,” the host father concedes, and buys him a sandwich anyway.

At the dining table in their house once again. His host parents on one side, their backs to the kitchen, and he on the other, his back to the window that looks out onto the backyard and the pool. His host parents’ English is calm and impeccable, their words like birds returning at night. He feels the language sharp in his mouth; his tongue chafes against his teeth. He gathers his shattered voice, shard by ragged shard. He begins with a dramatic prelude—the memory of which will flush his cheeks and make him cringe for years to come, though later he will not remember if this was rehearsed or spontaneous. “Home is where the heart is,” he says, voice quivering, snot halfway between his nose and lips. It is a phrase he has picked up from a Christmas ornament. He tells them they are—this is—his home.

He apologizes, accepts his mistakes, makes no excuses. A laptop screen is flipped open, turned in his direction. His eyes take a moment to adjust to the brightness. A Word document, a couple of thousand words long. A diary of his arguments with his host mother, trifling skirmishes, cataloged by date and time. The fog in his head clears, things come into focus. Words such as *annoyed* and *too long* glisten on the page. It feels like a betrayal that his host mother has kept a diary all along.

A copy of the document has been emailed to his local coordinator and to the national coordinator, who upon reading his host mother’s notes will, the exchange student later learns from his local coordinator, question whether it was a loving household for him anyway. “Feeding off of each other’s negativity,” someone will suggest. The document is also emailed to the exchange student’s family back in Karachi, but he will log in to his father’s account to delete the message before his father can read it.

When his host family says that they forgive him, that in the future the doors of their house will be open to him, he feels irritated. These wrapped gifts of kindness, packaged in a supremely American brand of congeniality.

Back at the house of his local coordinator's parents, he is surprised when, for the first time during his nearly year-long stay in America, the electricity goes out. He is used to load-shedding, which happens almost every day in Karachi, but he has allowed himself the luxury of getting used to the constant presence of artificial light and air around him. The whir of the refrigerator disappears, and the restless shadow of the ceiling fan attains a state of uncanny calm. Soon the recycled air in the house begins to shift, an osmosis from cool to warm to unbearably hot. His hairy armpits are damp; a wet film of sweat has formed where his left foot rests on his right. He mistakes the churning in his stomach for hunger. He goes to the kitchen and retrieves the leftover sandwich from the fridge. He feels queasy—sick, not hungry—and tosses it in the bin. He wants to throw up, so he goes to the bathroom, leans over the toilet, and heaves. Nothing. He remains hunched over the bowl, his mouth dry and tears in his eyes. How much he has lied to others, to himself, he thinks, everything a deception, a facade. When his parents come to pick him up at the airport a week from now—reunited with the well-disciplined boy they know from back home—their eyes will swell, faces pasty with pride.

He should shower, he thinks, and takes his shirt off and then his shorts and hangs them up. He looks at his face in the mirror. Rheumy, jaundiced eyes; ruddy, terra-cotta complexion. Sunlight makes the patina of sebum on his skin gleam. The boy he sees is not the one who arrived here 10 months ago. He has a small belly now, lean muscles on his arms from all the swimming, and pimples scattered all over his forehead. Face saturated with fat, cheeks the size of apricots. He has lost fluency in the language of his body; only now is he noticing.

He picks up the razor. For a split second the blade catches light from the sun streaming in through the window, a small spot in its center, from which brightness explodes. But the hair in his armpits is too long and unruly now. He imagines it will get caught in the blade, tangle, and become stubborn knots. He puts the razor back down. He raises both his arms and places them on his head. He turns his head left and then right, sniffs—that new scent of his body: animal and ethereal and smarmy. When did he become this person, and how?

This story appears in the December 2021 print edition.

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The End of Trust

A Trust Recession Is Looming Over the American Economy

By Jerry Useem

Manufacturer inventories. Durable-goods orders. Nonfarm payrolls. Inflation-adjusted GDP. These are the dreary reportables that tell us how our economy is doing. And many of them look a whole lot better now than they did at their early-pandemic depths. But what if there's another factor we're missing? What if the data points are obscuring a deepening recession in a commodity that underpins them all?

Trust. Without it, Adam Smith's invisible hand stays in its pocket; Keynes's "animal spirits" are muted. "Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust," the Nobel Prize–winning economist Kenneth Arrow wrote in 1972.

But trust is less quantifiable than other forms of capital. Its decline is vaguely felt before it's plainly seen. As companies have gone virtual during the coronavirus pandemic, supervisors wonder whether their remote workers are in fact working. New colleagues arrive and leave without ever having met. Direct reports ask if they could have that casual understanding put down in writing. No one knows whether the boss's cryptic closing remark was ironic or hostile.

Sadly, those suspicions may have some basis in fact. The longer employees were apart from one another during the pandemic, a recent study of more than 5,400 Finnish workers found, the more their faith in colleagues fell. Ward van Zoonen of Erasmus University, in the Netherlands, began measuring trust among those office workers early in 2020. He asked them: How much did they trust their peers? How much did they trust their supervisors? And how much did they believe that those people trusted them? What he found was unsettling. In March 2020, trust levels were

fairly high. By May, they had slipped. By October—about seven months into the pandemic—the employees' degree of confidence in one another was down substantially.

Another survey, by the Centre for Transformative Work Design in Australia, found bosses having trust issues too. About 60 percent of supervisors doubted or were unsure that remote workers performed as well or were as motivated as those in the office. Meanwhile, demand for employee-surveillance software has skyrocketed more than 50 percent since before the pandemic. And this spring, American employees were leaving their jobs at the highest rate since at least 2000.

Each of these data points could, of course, have multiple causes. But together they point in a worrisome direction: We may be in the midst of a trust recession.

Trust is to capitalism what alcohol is to wedding receptions: a social lubricant. In low-trust societies (Russia, southern Italy), economic growth is constrained. People who don't trust other people think twice before investing in, collaborating with, or hiring someone who isn't a family member (or a member of their criminal gang). The concept may sound squishy, but the effect isn't. The economists Paul Zak and Stephen Knack found, in a study published in 1998, that a 15 percent bump in a nation's belief that "most people can be trusted" adds a full percentage point to economic growth each year. That means that if, for the past 20 years, Americans had trusted one another like Ukrainians did, our annual GDP per capita would be $11,000 lower; if we had trusted like New Zealanders did, it'd be $16,000 higher. "If trust is sufficiently low," they wrote, "economic growth is unachievable."

If you can rely on people to do what they say they're going to do—without costly coercive mechanisms to make them dependable—a lot of things become possible, argued Francis Fukuyama in his 1995 book, *Trust*. In the late 19th century, it was "highly sociable Americans" who developed the first large-scale corporations, effectively pooling the ideas, efforts, and interests of strangers. In the late 20th, some of the earliest iterations of the internet emerged from the same talent for association. Throughout nearly all of America's history, its economy has benefited from a high degree of trust.

But leaks in the trust reservoir have been evident since the ’70s. Trust in government dropped sharply from its peak in 1964, according to the Pew Research Center, and, with a few exceptions, has been sputtering ever since. This trend coincides with broader cultural shifts like declining church membership, the rise of social media, and a contentious political atmosphere.

Data on trust between individual Americans are harder to come by; surveys have asked questions about so-called interpersonal trust less consistently, according to Pew. But, by one estimate, the percentage of Americans who believed “most people could be trusted” hovered around 45 percent as late as the mid-’80s; it is now 30 percent. According to Pew, half of Americans believe trust is down because Americans are “not as reliable as they used to be.”

Those studies of suspicious Zoom workers suggest the Trust Recession is getting worse. By October 2021, just 13 percent of Americans were still working from home because of COVID-19, down from 35 percent in May 2020, the first month the data were collected. But the physical separation of colleagues has clearly taken a toll, and the effects of a long bout of remote work may linger.

Why? One reason is: We’re primates. To hear the anthropologists tell it, we once built reciprocity by picking nits from one another’s fur—a function replaced in less hirsute times by the exchange of gossip. And what better gossip mart is there than the office? Separate people, and the gossip—as well as more productive forms of teamwork—dries up. In the 1970s, an MIT professor found that we are four times as likely to communicate regularly with someone sitting six feet away from us as with someone 60 feet away. Maybe all that face time inside skyscrapers wasn’t useless after all.

Trust is about two things, according to a recent story in the *Harvard Business Review*: competence (is this person going to deliver quality work?) and character (is this a person of integrity?). “To trust colleagues in both of these ways, people need clear and easily discernible signals about them,” wrote the organizational experts Heidi Gardner and Mark Mortensen. They argue that the shift to remote work made gathering this information harder.

Unconsciously, they conclude, we "interpret a lack of physical contact as a signal of untrustworthiness."

This leaves us prone to what social scientists call "fundamental attribution error"—the creeping suspicion that Blake hasn't called us back because he doesn't care about the project. Or because he cares about it so much that he's about to take the whole thing to a competitor. In the absence of fact—that Blake had minor dental surgery—elaborate narratives assemble.

Add to the disruption and isolation of the pandemic a political climate that urges us to meditate on the distance—ethnic, generational, ideological, socioeconomic—separating us from others, and it's not hard to see why many Americans feel disconnected.

What has suffered most are "weak ties"—relationships with acquaintances who fall somewhere between stranger and friend, which sociologists find are particularly valuable for the dissemination of knowledge. A closed inner circle tends to recycle knowledge it already has. New information is more likely to come from the serendipitous encounter with Alan, the guy with the fern in his office who reports to Phoebe and who remembers the last time someone suggested splitting the marketing division into three teams, and how that went.

Some evidence suggests that having more weak ties can shorten bouts of unemployment. In a famous 1973 survey, the Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter discovered that, among 54 people who had recently found a new job through someone they knew, 28 percent had heard about the new position from a weak tie, versus 17 percent from a strong one. When the weak ties fall away, our "radius of trust"—to borrow Fukuyama's term—shrinks.

That's a problem for individual employees, as much as they may appreciate the flexibility of working anywhere, anytime. And it's a problem for business leaders, who are trying to weigh the preferences of those employees against the enduring existence of the place that employs them. They don't want to end up like IBM. It saved $2 billion making much of its workforce remote as early as the 1980s, only to reverse course in 2017, when it recognized that remote work was depressing collaboration.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella recently wondered whether companies were "burning" some of the face-to-face "social capital we built up in this phase where we are all working remote. What's the measure for that?"

A trust spiral, once begun, is hard to reverse. One study found that, even 20 years after reunification, fully half of the income disparity between East and West Germany could be traced to the legacy of Stasi informers. Counties that had a higher density of informers who'd ratted out their closest friends, colleagues, and neighbors fared worse. The legacy of broken trust has proved extraordinarily difficult to shake.

It's not hard to find advice on how to build a culture of trust: use humor, share your vulnerabilities, promote transparency. But striking the right tone in today's pitched political climate, often over Zoom, possibly under surveillance, is no easy feat.

Even so, it may be instructive for companies trying to navigate this moment to remember why they were formed in the first place. By the late 19th century, it was evident that some jobs were too crucial to leave to a loose association of tradespeople. If the mill had to be running full steam at all hours, you needed to know who could handle the assembly line, who could fix a faulty gasket, and above all who would reliably show up day after day. Then you needed those people legally incorporated into one body and bound by the norms, attitudes, and expectations baked into the culture of that body.

Not so incidentally, those first corporations went by a particular moniker. They were called "trusts." And without that component underpinning all the industrial might and entrepreneurial ingenuity, you have to wonder if they could ever have been built at all.

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Snowbirds

Naomi Harris: Technicolor Photos of a Bygone Miami Beach

By Jaquira Díaz

In December 1999, Naomi Harris turned down a job offer, left her apartment in New York, and checked into the Haddon Hall Hotel, in Miami Beach. She was 26. She wanted to be a photographer.

The hotel was a year-round home for some and a seasonal residence for others—snowbirds, mostly in their 80s and 90s, who came down from New England or Canada and stayed all winter. They didn't have a lot of money, and they didn't go there for luxury. Their days were spent together: eating, dancing, flirting, playing bingo. They welcomed Harris, allowing her to photograph intimate moments of joy and vulnerability.

Haddon Hall was "the last of the old-time hotels," Harris writes in her recently published photography collection of the same name. In the 1980s and '90s, Miami Beach was a city in transition. The run-down Art Deco hotels, which had flourished during the city's mid-century golden era, were

home to working-class families and retirees on fixed incomes. This was my city. Every day, I passed Haddon Hall on my walk from my day job to my night job. Miami Beach was gentrifying, but it still had a mix of people from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Russia working the hotels and retirement homes; Jewish retirees going for early-bird dinners at Wolfie's; club kids lining up at Crobar and Warsaw. South Beach, with its large LGBTQ community, had become an AIDS epicenter. Everyone was trying to survive.

Haddon Hall, Harris writes, had all the standard types: "the popular girl, the comedian, the loner, the jezebel." Harris captured them all in Technicolor. She took photos of women sunbathing by the pool and couples tearing up the dance floor at a hotel party. Some had lost spouses and siblings. Some had survived the Holocaust. Sam (shown eating Corn Flakes above), who mostly kept to himself, had lost his first wife and child at Auschwitz.

By the late '90s, most of the South Beach hotels had been renovated to cater to wealthy tourists. Haddon Hall would soon be renovated too, and its residents, much like the rest of us, would be priced out of South Beach. Today, Miami Beach feels like a different city: glittering storefronts, tech moguls in Lamborghinis. In the 20 years since Harris started her project, everyone in these photos has died, but she remembers their stories—the gossip, the laughter, the misbehaving. How once, she and Sylvia stood in line outside Club Madonna, only to turn around when they realized they couldn't afford the two-drink minimum. These were her friends.

This article appears in the December 2021 print edition. When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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The Martial Art I Can’t Live Without

Review: ‘Breathe,’ by Rickson Gracie, and the Lure of Jiu-Jitsu

By Stephanie Hayes

On November 12, 1993, in a sports arena in Denver, a lean Brazilian man in an outfit resembling a pair of pajamas stepped into an octagon to fight. There were no weight classes or judges, and very few rules. His opponent, a dead-eyed Dutch karate champion named Gerard Gordeau, had already

beaten two other men that night, including a 420-pound Samoan sumo wrestler he'd kicked so hard that bits of tooth got lodged in his foot. But Royce Gracie was unfazed. In less than two minutes, the jiu-jitsu black belt brought Gordeau to the ground, got behind him, and wrapped an arm beneath his chin to secure a rear naked choke. Gordeau tapped frantically on the mat to signal his submission. The audience at the inaugural Ultimate Fighting Championship event went wild.

Up until then, martial arts in the American popular imagination had featured fighters in cartoonish striking mode—a bare-chested Bruce Lee sending men flying with a single kick or punch, or Ralph Macchio, as the Karate Kid, raising his limbs like a praying mantis. The ground-fighting art honed in Brazil over generations by an entire Gracie dynasty was virtually unknown here. Within months of UFC 1, which both critics and fans saw as a Gracie infomercial, membership quadrupled at the California academy that Rorion Gracie, one of Royce's brothers, had started a few years earlier. In the decades since, Brazilian jiu-jitsu has exploded in the United States, and not just under Gracie leadership; every day, thousands of devotees head into humid, rank basement academies across the country, hoping to … well, what are we looking for?

For a discipline that involves getting sat on, sweated on, and uncomfortably entangled with another person—your knee torqued, your arm hyperextended, your carotid artery crushed in a choke hold—Brazilian jiu-jitsu elicits surprisingly cerebral comparisons: to chess, philosophy, even psychoanalysis. Another of Royce's brothers—he has six, each with the first initial *R*—is the legendary Rickson Gracie, considered by many to be the greatest jiu-jitsu practitioner of all time. Rickson leans into the elevated rhetoric around jiu-jitsu in his new memoir, *Breathe: A Life in Flow*, the latest installment in the family's long promotional campaign. "I know this might sound like an exaggeration," he writes of his father, "but Hélio Gracie was to Jiu Jitsu what Albert Einstein was to physics."

Frail and prone to fainting (he suffered from vertigo), Hélio started out as a spectator at his family's academy in Brazil, run by his more athletic brother, Carlos. When Hélio finally began training in the late 1920s, his approach to jiu-jitsu, a martial art first developed in 15th-century Japan and then

modified into judo, had to be strategic. “You can’t lift a car, but when you use a jack you can easily lift it,” Hélio explained in a family history called *The Gracie Way*. “I simply adapted the use of a ‘jack’ to every position of jiu-jitsu.” Leverage, tension, and timing were the secret to his techniques, rather than speed or strength. Sidelining the dramatic throws of judo, he experimented with new ways of fighting while seated or on one’s back. In *Breathe*, Rickson goes all in on the art’s David-beats-Goliath theme of tactical mastery over physical attributes.

This brains-over-brawn emphasis is a large part of the appeal for someone like me, who, at 5 foot 3, spent years loving the wrong sport (basketball). That jiu-jitsu really is like solving an ever-shifting puzzle—calculating your opponent’s potential next moves and trying to trap him in a choice between, say, getting shoulder-locked or choked—also helps account for its incongruous acolytes. Take John Danaher, a monklike New Zealander who got his first taste of jiu-jitsu as a graduate student studying epistemology at Columbia University; a guy half his size challenged him to a fight (in the philosophy-department office) and wore him out in minutes. Danaher started training, and eventually abandoned his pursuit of a doctorate to teach at the Renzo Gracie Academy in Manhattan, where he helped revolutionize the way grapplers think about leg attacks.

But the blend of underdog appeal and mental challenges goes only so far to explain why practitioners flock to their gyms with a mangled finger buddy-taped to its neighbor, a swollen elbow strapped to the torso, or—as one longtime training partner of mine did while suffering a groin strain—legs bound together like a mermaid. CrossFit fanatics fade in comparison with *jiu-jiteiro* who consider cauliflower ear—ear cartilage so damaged by external pressure that it hardens in pale bumps—almost a rite of passage. (Draining a teammate’s fluid-filled ear using a diabetic needle is something we take in stride too.) We plan our travel around must-visit gyms and our days around training schedules. We spend hours drilling a single move, figuring out how to react should our opponent put his leg an inch farther to the right, or shift her weight forward, or use a hand to block our foot, or, or, or. We crave the adrenaline-fueled part of class when we get to roll. In round after round of live sparring with partners of all sizes and skill levels,

we test new moves, polish old ones—or just try to survive while a heavyweight rests on our rib cage.

I realize this sounds like a commitment verging on cultishness—and some degree of that is inescapable in a grueling discipline that emphasizes rituals, routines, community, and mind-body synchrony. The Gracie family definitely doesn't hide its fanaticism: Carlos, a self-taught nutritionist with mystical leanings, urged the clan to follow a strict alkaline diet, and believed that certain letters were powerful (hence all those unusual names starting with *R*). Today, a pseudo-religious reverence for instructors is all but baked into the art: In many gyms, students bow to a portrait of an elderly Hélio as they step on and off the mats, and address certain instructors as "Master."

Yet it's precisely in ascribing quasi-spiritual powers to jiu-jitsu that *Breathe* misses the art's real appeal. Rickson peddles jiu-jitsu as a way for students to discover their "true personalities," for parents to raise good and robust children, for people of all walks of life to harmoniously mingle. But what keeps me coming back isn't its loftiness but its groundedness. For a couple of hours each day, in a basement with leaky pipes and the heat cranked up in all seasons, jiu-jitsu demands that I focus only on the problems I'm facing right there, on the mat—or else I'll get choked. Sparring offers brutal real-time feedback, its rhythms forcing you to bounce back from failure—if you (or your partner) "tap out," you slap hands and start over. Anyone who trains will tell you that there is some life crossover: When you've had your joints bent to the breaking point, stressful situations off the mat don't seem so daunting. And as an antidote to our distracting, screen-driven lives, you can't beat the true absorption and slow grind of jiu-jitsu.

But Rickson offers something closer to a cure-all, rhapsodizing about the academy as a "neutral place" where the hierarchies and hatreds of the outside world dissolve—a view I've heard many echo. "It was hard and sometimes awkward when a pot grower rolled with a cop," he writes, but "mutual respect" wins out in the gym. I've seen some unlikely friendships forged on the mats (between conspiracy theorists and journalists, between doctors and anti-vaxxers); I've made some of my closest friends there. But *Breathe* doesn't just overpromise; it overlooks glaring departures from this

creed. Rickson says nothing about racism in the jiu-jitsu world (as in the UFC, some of its biggest stars spout far-right rhetoric). He hardly mentions women, a growing presence but still a clear minority in most gyms. Recent revelations of sexual abuse of women and minors by prominent instructors have drawn serious attention to the dangers of undue reverence for black belts, whose stature often shields them from censure. Jiu-jitsu involves extreme physical intimacy and poses extreme risks—we have to trust our training partners to respect the tap and other boundaries. Does Rickson have any idea that as we women suss out a new gym, we often rely on a network to know who is safe to roll with and whom we should avoid?

As jiu-jitsu's allure grows—a proposed police-reform bill in Michigan would require all officers in the state to hold at least a blue belt (or have equivalent martial-arts experience), as though a scrap of fabric is a surefire way to avoid the use of excessive force—Gracie-style hype becomes even more important to avoid. Thankfully, as the reckoning with the mistreatment of women in jiu-jitsu shows, plenty of its devotees are clear-eyed. The philosophical black belt John Danaher, who wears a skintight rash guard at all times, ever-ready to teach a technique, once offered an unillusioned verdict: Jiu-jitsu "doesn't make you good, it doesn't make you bad. It will just reinforce what you already are," he told *The New Yorker*. "If you're an asshole, it will make you a worse asshole. If you're a good person, it will make you a better person."

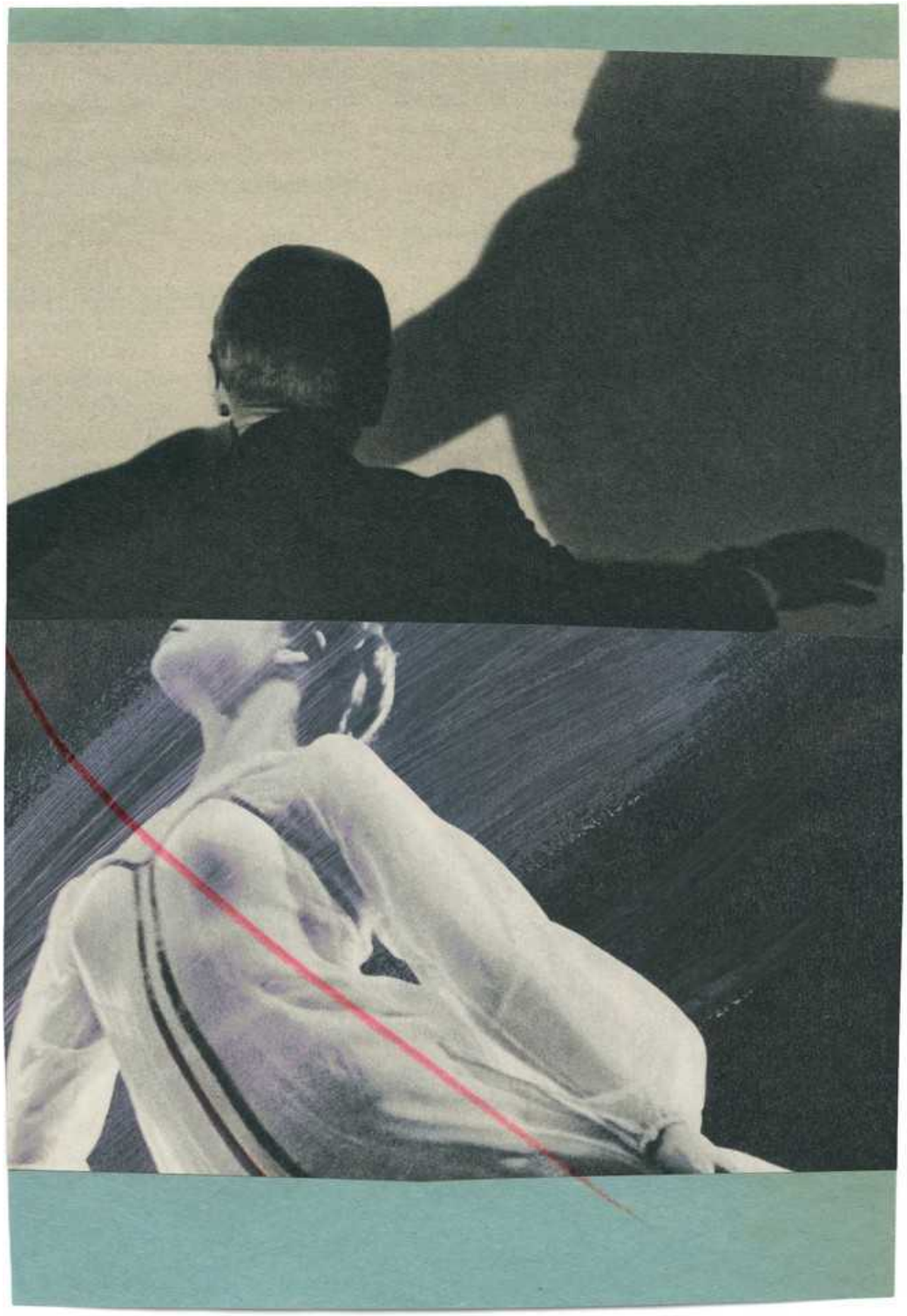
That is right in line with a jiu-jitsu mantra you'll hear yelled from the sidelines during sparring: "Position before submission," which amounts to "Don't get ahead of yourself." Even as we're taught to think three steps ahead, we're encouraged to practice restraint. In the quest for a careful balance, any practitioner might at least have a shot at humility.

This article appears in the December 2021 print edition with the headline "The Martial Art I Can't Live Without."When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

The Miraculous Sound of Forgiveness

Matthew Aucoin: ‘The Marriage of Figaro’ Is Mozart’s Masterpiece

By Matthew Aucoin



Opera is impossible and always has been. The operatic ideal, an imagined union of all the human senses and all art forms—music, drama, dance, poetry, painting—is unattainable by its very nature. This impossibility is

opera's lifeblood: Most of the art form's bizarre and beautiful fruits are the result of artists' quest for this permanently elusive alchemy. But if any one work is capable of evading or surmounting this foundational impossibility, for me it's Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* ("The Marriage of Figaro"). *Figaro* would likely be my pick if I had to choose a single favorite work of art—and that includes books, movies, plays, and paintings as well as music.

In this three-hour transfiguration of Pierre Beaumarchais' politically charged comedy, Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte achieve an aerial view of the human soul, a portrait both of everything that's irresistible and brilliant and sexy about human beings, and of the things that make us so infuriating to one another. The opera's secret ingredient is love. Mozart loves his characters, even when they're at their lowest, and so we end up loving them too. *Figaro* also has the unique ability to make me forget, whether I experience it as a conductor or a listener, that I'm hearing an opera at all. This is abnormal. In opera, artifice typically reigns supreme; usually this is part of its fun. When I perform or listen to Verdi or Wagner, I never forget that I'm experiencing a capital-*O* Opera, nor am I supposed to. The same is true, I think, of Mozart's other operas: As I experience *Don Giovanni* or *Die Zauberflöte*, I never quite forget that I've been transported to a fantastical imaginary world.

But *Figaro* is a different beast. It is so close to reality that, in its uncannier moments, its artifice can't be perceived. Its music seems somehow to bypass my ears and enter my heart and psyche unmediated. The sensation of being immersed in *Figaro* is no different, for me, from the feeling of gratitude for being alive.

I'm hardly alone in my baffled amazement. "It is totally beyond me how anyone could create anything so perfect," Johannes Brahms once said of *Figaro*. "Nothing like it was ever done again, not even by Beethoven." And *Figaro* is the only opera I've ever conducted that, over the course of a given production, daily provokes some cast member to pause, shake their head, and say, "This is just the greatest fucking thing ever, isn't it?"

In some ways, *Figaro* is responsible for my being a musician, and it's certainly responsible for my work in opera. When I was 8 years old or so, I loved classical music but couldn't stand opera, which I'd heard only bits of

on Saturday-afternoon radio broadcasts. Operatic singing struck me as jarring and unpleasant. I was even a little embarrassed on the singers' behalf: They seemed to have no idea how silly they sounded. For whatever reason, maybe because I was enthusiastic about Mozart and was playing some of his easier piano music at the time, my parents bought me a VHS tape of *Figaro*—Peter Hall's production, recorded at Glyndebourne in 1973. I realize now that this production had a dream cast of leading ladies: a young Kiri Te Kanawa as the Countess, an even younger Frederica von Stade as Cherubino, the Romanian soprano Ileana Cotrubaș as Susanna.

This video had a huge impact on me. It gave me the sense of suddenly having direct access to formerly unknown adult emotions. I felt a visceral connection to Mozart's characters, a sympathy for them in my gut and my throat, in spite of their confusing grown-up problems. I didn't grasp the nuances of *Figaro*'s plot, but something communicated itself to me nonetheless. In the opera's ensemble scenes, Mozart has a way of layering his characters' psychic states so that we experience the sum total of the spiritual energy in the room. In these scenes, no emotion or intention can be hidden; every secret feeling is brought to light. All the guilt and desire and insecurities and loathing and love accumulate and cause the musical air molecules to vibrate furiously.

I think what moved me, in these ensembles, was the sheer self-contradictory mass of them, the sense that I was in the presence of a complex, tightly wound ball of emotions whose strands I could never untangle. Precisely because Mozart leaves nothing out and shows each person in all their messy contradictoriness, it's impossible to condemn his characters, no matter how awful they are to one another. The music is itself an act of forgiveness.

Figaro affected me in less lofty ways, too. One thing I love about Mozart is the inextricability, in his music, of the spiritual and the sensual, and *Figaro*, in addition to constituting a thorough spiritual education, is also very sexy. The dangerous, painfully prolonged erotic games in the opera's second act made me feel queasy when I returned to the piece a couple of years later, on the verge of adolescence. What on earth was I looking at? The androgynous Cherubino—the character is a teenage boy, but he's sung by an adult mezzo-soprano—is stripped of his page-boy outfit by two women, Susanna

and the Countess, so that they can dress him up as a woman. (Cherubino is in big trouble, and they're trying to disguise him as a woman so he can avoid being sent to the army.)

It sure looks as if Cherubino and the Countess might end up having sex—or maybe the two of them and Susanna are on the verge of a threesome. I reasoned that the extreme erotic tension between these women was okay because Cherubino was "really" a boy—but then, I also tried to reason away my crush on von Stade's Cherubino by insisting to myself that Cherubino was "really" a girl. What was reality here, anyway?

Whatever I was looking at, it was mighty queer. I had no idea music could embody such transcendently transgressive sensations, these fleeting surges of warmth, of uncontainable desire for … *something*. I'd just begun to experience such sensations myself, and they made me feel very guilty. What did it mean that Mozart, that most angelic-sounding of composers, also evidently felt such things?

F*igaro*'s score consists of miracle after miracle, but its final scene might be the most astonishing of all. I've turned to these few minutes of music many times in my life, in times of both difficulty and joy. Many before me have highlighted this sequence as one of the wonders of the operatic world: For the philosopher Theodor Adorno, *Figaro*'s finale was among those moments "for whose sake the entire … form might have been invented." I wouldn't dare to claim that I can explain what makes these few minutes so magical. But maybe I can offer some clues.*Figaro* is riddled with numerous interleaving subplots, but to appreciate its finale, you need to understand only the main thrust of the narrative. Count Almaviva, a Spanish nobleman, has been lusting after Susanna, his wife's chambermaid, who is about to be married to the Count's manservant, Figaro. The Count has recently abolished the feudal *droit du seigneur*, the legendary right of the master of an estate to sleep with his female servants on their wedding night. He knows that this enlightened gesture has earned him significant social capital among his servants, but he wants to sleep with Susanna anyway. He figures he just has to be a little sneakier about it than prior generations were.

But the Count underestimates the strength of Susanna's friendship with his wife: Susanna tells the Countess everything, and they join forces with

Figaro to expose the Count's hypocrisy. At her wedding dinner, Susanna slips the Count a note inviting him to a nighttime rendezvous in the garden. But when night falls, Susanna and the Countess trade outfits; unbeknownst to him, the Count ends up wooing his own wife. Across the garden, Figaro and Susanna, who is dressed as the Countess, pretend to be overcome by passion for each other. The Count overhears them—just as they intended—and believes that Figaro has seduced his wife. Enraged, he yells bloody murder; the whole population of the estate comes running. But just as the Count prepares to punish his wife's wrongdoing, his actual wife steps out from behind him. He realizes that he has been tricked. Everyone stands dumbstruck, waiting to see how he'll react.

It's worth noting how fraught this moment would have seemed to a European audience in 1786. A nobleman has been outsmarted and publicly humiliated by his servants and his wife. Surely the Count's father or grandfather would have fired Figaro and Susanna on the spot, or sent them off to prison, or worse. But the question of how a man was to respond to such a situation was a borderline issue at the time, not so different from the question of how certain companies were supposed to react when their CEOs were accused of sexual harassment in the fall of 2017. We all know what used to happen, and we all know what the right thing to do is—so what'll it be?

The whole cast waits, breathless. All eyes are on the Count.

He falls to his knees. "*Contessa, perdono*," he sings. "Countess, forgive me."

Mozart sets these words to an ascending major sixth, starting from the dominant, D natural. It is a gesture of supplication, an aspiring upward from a point of abasement. The Count's first *Contessa, perdono* concludes by relaxing a half step downward from the tonic, G, to F-sharp.

He pauses. He realizes that he doesn't sound quite sorry enough.

He repeats himself: *Perdono, perdono*. This time, he stretches his first syllable upward across the interval of a seventh, a slightly wider reach, the sense of entreaty intensified. His last *perdono* finishes with a drawn-out

ascending slide from A-sharp to B-natural. It is a pleading, childlike gesture, one that barely dares to hope. The Count sounds anything but authoritative. His "Forgive me" is not a command, as it easily could have been. This final *perdono* is almost a prayer.

The Countess pauses. When she begins to sing, her phrasing is almost identical to the Count's; they are married, after all, and they speak in the same aristocratic cadences. But compare the placement of each of the Count's pitches with each of the Countess's. Whereas the Count starts on the dominant and yearns upward with a plaintive major sixth, the Countess begins on G, the tonic, and reaches beneficently up a perfect fifth. This gesture bespeaks a profound serenity and poise; she is entirely in control. "*Più docile io sono*," she sings, "*e dico di sì*." "I am gentler"—a moment before, when the Count thought he'd caught his wife in the act, he had loudly refused to forgive her—"and I will say yes."

The first time the Countess sings the words *e dico di sì*, she doesn't sound especially convincing. Mozart places the word *sì* on a gentle slide from D down to C, a gesture that might be taken as a weary sigh of resignation. She knows it doesn't sound quite right. It's not easy to forgive. Just as the Count realized, after his first *perdono*, that he needed to try again, the Countess realizes that her first "yes" wasn't quite generous enough.

She repeats herself—*e dico di sì*—this time coming gently to rest on the tonic. No more hesitations, no drawn-out dissonances, just: yes.

The violins songfully outline a G-major chord with a descending motion that—how to put it?—is a blessing, light breaking through clouds. Each member of the cast gives voice to their hushed wonder at the reconciliation they have just witnessed. Now, they say, we will all be happy.

So why, the listener might wonder, are they singing the saddest music ever written? The double gesture of the Count's humility and the Countess's forgiveness causes an overwhelming release of energy: The cast is transformed into a huge pipe organ. But what is this energy that's suddenly unleashed? Why is this moment so heartbreaking? What are they really saying?

Look closely at the words they sing. *Ah, tutti contenti / Saremo così*. An idiomatic English translation would be "Ah, we will all / Be happy like this." But an awkward, word-for-word translation reveals something else: "Ah, all happy / We will be like this." The separability of that last line —"We will be like this"—makes all the difference. Mozart sets this text as a slow, inexorable chorale, and he repeats the words again and again until repetition uncovers a meaning that's in direct opposition to the literal one. *Saremo, saremo così*. "We will be, will be like this."

They know. The whole cast knows that what they've witnessed is a beautiful illusion. They know the Count won't change, and neither will the Countess, and nor will any of them. Life will stay complicated. They'll still marry one person and fall in love with another; they'll still get jealous, and misunderstand one another, and hurt one another without meaning to. And maybe, once or twice in a lifetime, they'll be granted a moment of utter clarity. A sense that it's all beautiful, even if it's not beautiful *for them*. An aerial view of their own souls. For whatever that's worth.

What could be left to say or do? Once this heart-scouring chorale has floated home to G major, the strings trace a descending line that gradually outlines a dominant seventh chord: G–E–C-sharp–A. I can't describe this passage any other way than to say that, in the afterglow of the chorale, it feels like someone is choked up, and when the strings descend from G to a fleeting E minor, a tear finally breaks free and runs down their cheek. (In some productions, the Count and Countess embrace at this point.)

But this naked emotion lasts only an instant. That C-sharp has a gleam in its eye, a welcome hint of Mozartian mischief: It contains the possibility of modulation out of G major into D major, the key of the opera's famously frenetic overture. Together with the high E that the flute plays above it, the C-sharp seems to be asking, "Are we finally ready to have some fun?"

Yes indeed. The music bursts open into a jubilant, hard-won allegro. After all these exhausting excavations of the human heart, everyone is ready to party. This moment is challenging for conductors, and the reason has everything to do with the characters' psychological state. In fast quarter notes, the whole cast sings the words *Corriam tutti*: "Let's all run" (that is, run to get drunk and forget themselves as soon as possible). Beneath them,

the strings and bassoons play a giddy, light-speed line of running eighth notes that practically recapitulates their part from the overture.

The singers inevitably rush here. It's a law of nature. In no performance, ever, have the singers not felt the urge to push forward at this moment. After all, their part is much easier than the orchestra's, and both the music and the words ("let's run let's run let's run! ") egg them on. The poor orchestra, meanwhile, is down in the pit breaking a sweat just trying to stay together. Even on some rather well-known studio recordings of the opera, singers and orchestra come egregiously unstuck here.

You know what? I think the singers are right. These characters are trying to outrun reality itself. Damn right that they should speed up. It's the conductor's job, and the orchestra's, to keep up with them. The end of *Figaro* should go up in smoke. Having examined the heart's every crevice, having exposed every weakness, every selfish or shameful desire, and still insisting that love conquers all, there's nothing left for Mozart to do but light the fireworks.

This essay has been adapted from Matthew Aucoin's new book, The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera*. It appears in the December 2021 print edition with the headline "The Miraculous Sound of Forgiveness." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting* The Atlantic.

Emerson Didn’t Practice the Self-Reliance He Preached

Review: ‘The Transcendentalists and Their World,’ by Robert Gross

By Mark Greif

Vedran Štimac

In the lead-up to the bicentennial of American independence in 1976, a graduate student sent a proposal to an editor at a trade publisher in New York. Would he consider taking on a book about the Minutemen and their “shot heard round the world,” set painstakingly in a history of Concord, Massachusetts, the town where the North Bridge fight broke out? In 1977,

that book—which was also the student's dissertation—won a Bancroft Prize, the highest honor in the history profession. *The Minutemen and Their World* remains a classic, memorable within a wave of "community studies" that sought to explain big turning points—such as the outbreak of the Revolution and the Salem witch trials—at the level of local ties, focusing on loyalties and antipathies among neighbors, families, holders of property and office, laborers and servants.

The author, Robert A. Gross, went on to teach at Amherst, then the College of William and Mary, and finally the University of Connecticut. Rather than abandon his chosen locale of Concord, he has devoted half a century to an encompassing reconstruction of the town's politics, economy, and society from 1790 to 1850. His databases, begun on "punch cards and mainframe computers," have become ever-larger repositories, progressing from tapes to floppy disks to CD-ROMs to online storage. He has traced the scraps and details of scandals and human tragedies through newspaper columns, property deeds, tax records, and genealogical trees, detecting whiffs of disappointment and ecstasy in the scattered letters and memoirs of town descendants who were becoming more numerous, itinerant, and verbose as the United States matured. In *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, Gross has delivered a second harvest of his career-long work. It is a measured, beautiful volume that brings warm life, accuracy, and complexity to local history, swooping between the bird's-eye view and the tracery of many individual destinies.

After the yeomen with muskets had been memorialized, Concord became famous a second time, in the 1840s, for its writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his disciple Henry David Thoreau, the Alcott family, Margaret Fuller, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (whose residence was brief but significant) made the place a byword for the movement called Transcendentalism. Gross uses our devotion to those familiar heroes to interest us in the ordinary story of a tight-knit town turned unusual birthplace. He explores the communal web that supported the emergence of a philosophy steeped in romantic nature worship and dedicated to the lone soul—to the inner growth of the individual, untethered from social convention and tradition. The Revolution, he makes clear, was about community and self-governance, and it unfolded under the leadership of a group bound by ties of duty. How to

explain the subsequent emergence of the most celebrated cultural development in 19th-century America, which raised doubts about just such commitments, defying family and propinquity in the name of "man alone"?

Focused primarily on the years 1825 to 1845, Gross's 600 pages of absorbing narrative, plus 200 more of illuminating notes and documentation, are a refresher course in the birth of a market culture and a mass democracy in the age of Andrew Jackson, followed by the rise of the antislavery cause and stirrings of sectional conflict. Gross gives these grand trends a habitation in 25 square miles of Massachusetts farmland, where he detects a steady erosion of social unity.

For the future Transcendentalist leaders, who proselytized on behalf of the inner spirit empowered by solitary communion with nature, social embeddedness came in many forms. People who have never read *Walden* know that Thoreau lived alone for two years in his late 20s in a cabin beside Walden Pond, paring life down to the necessities. Almost as many are familiar with a seeming contradiction: Thoreau went home some weekends to his parents' house. Ardent defenders respond that young Henry was still a good son, assisting in the family pencil factory. This detail of filial loyalty is so unexpected that it usually ends the conversation.

The Transcendentalists and Their World puts Thoreau's experiment in solitude in context. In early-19th-century Concord, as Gross establishes with evidence from the census, no one lived alone who could help it. In 1837, the year of Thoreau's return from college, only a dozen people did, out of a town population of 2,000, and nearly all of them were widows in perilous situations. Family support was assumed in every enterprise, whether farming or law or keeping the town jail.

When Thoreau went to the woods to live deliberately, he had long been enmeshed in common forms of living together that are rarer today. His mother took in boarders throughout his childhood to supplement the family income. Reaching adulthood, he moved into Emerson's house to be handyman, gardener, and babysitter to Emerson's two young children. The family pencil manufacture was dependent from the start on contributions from kin and on local know-how. Thoreau's ne'er-do-well uncle on his mother's side had stumbled on a lode of "plumbago," or graphite, on a New

Hampshire farm, snapped it up, and drafted his more business-savvy brother-in-law to hold his scheme together with the unemployed cabinetmakers of Concord. This was the small-scale enterprise that helped the family pull itself into the middle class and send Henry to Harvard (with help from a scholarship that required Thoreau to collect rents from the university's tenants in the town of Chelsea).

Emerson, in contrast, was to the manor born—to "the Old Manse," to be exact. This was the grandparental home in Concord, residence of the Reverend Ezra Ripley, a figure out of a storybook. Still clad in breeches and hose decades after other men had switched to trousers, he instructed children in their catechism and parents in their duties to the community. Young Emerson occasionally visited from Boston, where he grew up as the scion of six generations of New England ministers—and where he proceeded, after Harvard, to occupy a pulpit at the city's Second Church. His move to Concord in 1834 has been rightly seen as one in a series of risky breaks with expectations: Following his bride's death from tuberculosis 17 months after their wedding in 1829, he'd resigned his pulpit and traveled to Europe. Yet Gross describes another man soon well rooted.

In his telling, Emerson's mother was ensconced in Concord, keeping house for Reverend Ripley, and upon his arrival in town, Emerson was already the ninth-richest taxpayer before starting his career there or acquiring fame, thanks to an enormous inheritance from his first wife's estate. He was still very much a minister, though one spared daily pastoral responsibilities. His own home front tended by his second wife, Lidian, and assorted hired help, Emerson was free to travel around giving guest sermons—ideally positioned to then do the same on a paid-lecture platform as a popular sage and orator.

Emersonian Transcendentalism, too, had roots in his ancestral world. A current of mild awakening had already coursed through a liberal and generous Congregationalism, which had largely done away with the Puritan belief in inherent sinfulness and predestination. Ministers in Emerson's circles espoused inborn goodness and a knowledge of God at birth. The "sentiment of religion," an inner divinity, was to be cultivated through self-improvement and service. Emerson substituted "Nature" for God, proposing

that the soul was roused most readily on walks in the woods or on a muddy common, apart from society. And it was Emerson who turned Transcendentalist inner divinity into the secular gospel of "Self-Reliance." "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me," he boasted. (This gave the aged Ripley infinite heartache.)

Emerson's extreme doctrine of individualism emerges in Gross's account as an utter contradiction of the visible, practical interdependence of Concord life. In his eagerness to elevate exemplars of his creed, Emerson plucked up young Thoreau, a nature-loving schoolteacher with a gift for classical languages, and encouraged his development as a representative character, "*the* man of Concord." He even installed him beside Walden Pond on acreage he had bought on a whim. The extent to which each man perhaps chafed at communal and family constraints, laboring under an unwelcome sense of dependence, isn't really Gross's concern. His point is social: Transcendentalist philosophy expressed a profound intuition of changes that were under way in America, in the details of work and the economy, but that had not yet obviously touched the family and the spirit. The movement was so successful because it rechanneled religious rhetoric to address modernizing shocks, otherwise unspoken, and tried to reassert an individual's control of his fate.

The quest of *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, as Gross turns from the luminaries to the daily Concord round, is to show that the transformations taking place in communication, travel, capitalism, and national party politics had been subtly diminishing the bonds of local feeling for decades since the Revolution. Emerson and Thoreau proposed that personal will and spiritual renewal could face down an atomization and sense of alienation that were spreading without anyone's deliberate choice. Gross takes up the challenge of revealing how that erosion and resistance were felt by ordinary people as they navigated their lives in the local community.

The old self-sufficiency that had anchored New England farm life entailed steady family labor and collaboration with other farmers to fulfill quite modest tastes, wants, and expectations of life. "Dinners followed a regular round," Gross writes: "baked beans one day, boiled dish another, and a roast

next, in strict succession." He documents that, as transport improved, "progressive" agriculture switched to intensive crops for market, and tastes turned to regional imports, bought with cash. "Why raise flax and wool in the fields and devote endless hours to the spinning wheel and loom when machine-made fabrics and ready-made clothes were available?" In the "new agricultural capitalism,"

A familiar story, but one etched with especial vividness here, as Gross introduces his dramatis personae in one generation, and we watch their children wrestle with the changes their parents have made. When the book opens, in the politically quietist "era of good feelings" of the 1820s, two lawyers, Samuel Hoar and John Keyes, have spun their legal practices into wealth and political dominance, vaulting to positions in the state legislature and in local offices. Rival store owners Daniel Shattuck and Samuel Burr control the merchant money. The cast is filled out by an aged physician, Isaac Hurd, and the jailkeeper, Abel Moore, both fierce speculators in real estate, aided by special access to knowledge of who is dying or being foreclosed on. Reverend Ripley is their long-lived Greek chorus, showing up on any occasion to croak a benediction upon tradition.

The members of the town establishment meet in the Freemasons' Hall and in the Social Circle (a club for the rich male elite), and on their own initiative decide to undertake urban redevelopment in the town center. They set restrictions to force out "any blacksmith shop … or building in which any filthy or offensive business shall be carried on," including carpenters and wagonmakers, the old mainstays of village life; they make way for retail and brand-new banks and insurance companies, to which these rich men supply the chief capital.

In the decades to follow, we witness a variety of insurgencies against this elite: an anti-Masonic movement that accuses the secretive Freemasons of dark homicidal conspiracies, as well as upsurges of partisan democracy in the Jacksonian era. These national trends and movements are given flesh and spirit in Concord, in alternately comic and terrifying chronicles of individual and group conflicts.

Equally illuminating are the struggles of sons and daughters who are expected to sustain their parents' projects but have inclinations of their

own. John Shepard Keyes, a son of the politician, is among the most poignant figures. “Young Keyes loved the outdoors as much as anyone of his class in Concord except for Thoreau”; high-spirited and mischievous, he just couldn’t please his dad. Plus he had bad luck. Teasing another boy one afternoon, he earned a rock thrown in his face, breaking his teeth and plunging him into excruciating pain:

He wished to join the Army or embark on some other kind of physical adventure. Instead, he was sent to Harvard, where his father paid surprise visits and once snooped in his desk and read his diary. Even as a graduate, he could get no freedom from surveillance: “My ‘foolish abominable infernal habits’ … were blasted and why? Because I drank a mug of flip at the ball.”

Gross’s fascinating revelation is that boys like Keyes came under the spell of Emerson. Rereading a lecture of Emerson’s 50 years after he had heard it in person, “Keyes, a man in his seventies, felt once more ‘the stir to … life and spirit’ evoked by the orator’s ‘power and eloquence.’” George Moore, a son of the jailkeeper, followed Emerson’s lectures devoutly if obtusely: “What I understood … I liked very much, but there was a good deal I could not understand.” Gross observes that “Emerson highlighted the distinctive dilemmas faced by youth coming of age”—impatience with established ways, spiritual yearnings, longing to make a mark—and as their attendance grew, his “lectures targeted the young … as his special constituency.”

The Emersonian vision of mental power and refusal of constraints affected young women too—teenagers who thrilled to his call but knew too well, as his brother’s fiancée, Elizabeth Hoar, told Emerson directly, that “no ‘idealizing girl’ in her experience had ever fulfilled her early promise after coming of age and marrying.” The fate of Martha Hunt—a brilliant young woman sent to Groton to study by her sacrificing farmer parents—was emblematic. “Emerson … encouraged her ambitions and lent her books,” Gross writes, but prospects remained limited. The only paid role commensurate to talents like hers was that of teacher—a job that approximately 20 percent of white women in antebellum Massachusetts held at some point. But “managing sixty children in a cramped schoolhouse” as a summer schoolmistress was demoralizing, and Hunt’s

thwarted interests left her “a strange girl,” according to a contemporary, “not content to milk cows and churn butter, and fry pork, without further hope or thought.” At 19, she drowned herself in the river. Nathaniel Hawthorne helped fish out the body.

Gross also shows that most of those who were galvanized by Emerson moved on from him. The few women who truly opted for an independent, risky life—plunging, as Margaret Fuller did, into authorship, feminism, reform efforts—“accused him of settling for a placid suburban existence.” Other townsfolk, like Keyes, settled into family expectations, marriage, and continuity themselves, and remembered the Transcendentalist inspiration fondly but vaguely.

T*he Transcendentalists and Their World* emphasizes throughout that individualism helped dissolve organic community. No doubt this was the long-term trend. Citizens aspired to self-reliance and spiritualized egotism, and the many revolutions of the period facilitated the shift. And yet in the detailed life stories with which this book swells, Gross reveals, over and over, Concord’s residents returning to family, tradition, responsibility, and the demands of neighborhood.

One of Gross’s own quieter formulations captures this truth: “Community was not so much declining as shifting forms.” The contours of this shift are discernible in the rise of ardent moral reforms with wider geographic range, such as abolitionism, the defense of the Cherokees, and women’s participation in the petitioning of Congress. It was as if earlier moral policing in one’s own parish—monitoring sin in oneself and in neighbors, creating tight but short-range bonds—split along two tracks. One led to individual self-improvement and self-realization, and the other to reform of “the nation” or “the people,” each mission cosmic rather than local, yet both with a communal thrust.

Quite subtly, the book fuels a certain suspicion of Emerson as an enthusiast and inspirer, a figure more capable of expansion than depth, impressed more by the “manly power” of merchants and capitalists than by the circumspection of scholars. He joined the Social Circle with the other nabobs of the town. Though a powerful spokesman once roused, he lagged

behind his abolitionist neighbors and family members. Emerson's racial attitudes were not admirable.

Meanwhile, a surprising hero emerges in his one truly unwavering and stubborn young follower. By the end of Gross's story, a new vision of Thoreau has taken shape. He is the townsman who turned his withdrawal into a conspicuously individual performance—"his well-built house" by Walden Pond "readily visible to passersby on the carriage road"—in order to take his neighbors and family along on his journey. Thoreau and his family were ardent abolitionists (his sister Helen was a friend of Frederick Douglass's), and he continued to hide enslaved people on their flight to Canada even while living at the pond.

The famous early chapters of *Walden*—which seem so brutally insulting toward greedy, wasteful, acquisitive farmers and townsfolk—turn out to have been delivered, face-to-face, as lectures to his neighbors in the Concord Lyceum in 1847, by a self-revealing Thoreau under the title "History of Himself." Such chastisement was in the old New England spirit of calls to the congregation. "Thoreau never sloughed off the heritage of Ezra Ripley and the message of community," Gross writes. "In his mind he was never alone. The community came with him."

This article appears in the December 2021 print edition with the headline "How Self-Reliant Was *Emerson?"*

Departments

- **An Ode to Barbecue Potato Chips**
  Void of nutritional value, divorced from the intense culinary process that is actual barbecuing, irresistible -- James Parker

An Ode to Barbecue Potato Chips

Barbecue Potato Chips Are Irresistible

By James Parker

How they call to you, call to you. At the gas station, at the supermarket, at the 7-Eleven: Barbecue potato chips. Delicately bristling in their half-inflated bags. Grating, one against another, in their syllables of trapped air. Do you want to eat them? No, it's more frenzied than that—this desire has the flavor of addiction. You want them all at once, immediately, stuffed into your mouth and shattering gorgeously between the millstones of your molars. You want the entirety of them. And then you want it all over again, until you feel ill.

Why BBQ chips? Why not, say, Sour Cream and Onion? I'm from Britain, land of the gourmet chip: Prawn Cocktail crisps were one of the staples of my young life. Smoky Bacon, Thai Sweet Chili—I've had them all. I should be jaded, my palate exhausted. But no. That trashy, voluptuous, salty-sweet synthetic BBQ flavor; that sticky, musky powder—it's amazing. Utterly denatured, completely divorced from the intense, long-haul culinary

process that is actual barbecuing, it miraculously retains a suggestion of charcoaly maturity. Of experience. It tastes like it's been through something.

You cannot consume them elegantly. There are noises, breathings, gushings of drool. Your mouth must open wide, dentist's-chair wide. At some point you're going to have to lick—or suck—your fingers.

And there's no satiety with BBQ chips, no natural limit. You want them, you want them, and then you never want to see them again. Nausea is their shadow companion. Between writing the second and third paragraphs of this ode I ate half a five-ounce bag, and now my stomach is involved: It's shifting, rinsing, distending, bulging toward some kind of utterance, as if trying to have an actual thought. Don't they call it the second brain? What have I done to my second brain?

Their nutritional value is of course nil. *Empty calories*: what a beautiful phrase. Negligible minerals (other than sodium), negligible vitamins, no virtues, as food, whatsoever. Floating zeros of energy, with the Buddha's own white light coming through them. These fried and flimsy discs are of no benefit to you. You know it and your body knows it. You're enjoying them for their own sake, their own taste, their own slant on the cosmos. So congratulate yourself, you powder-stained and gasping BBQ-chip lover. *Ars gratia artis*. You're an aesthete.

This article appears in the December 2021 print edition with the headline "Ode to Barbecue Potato Chips."

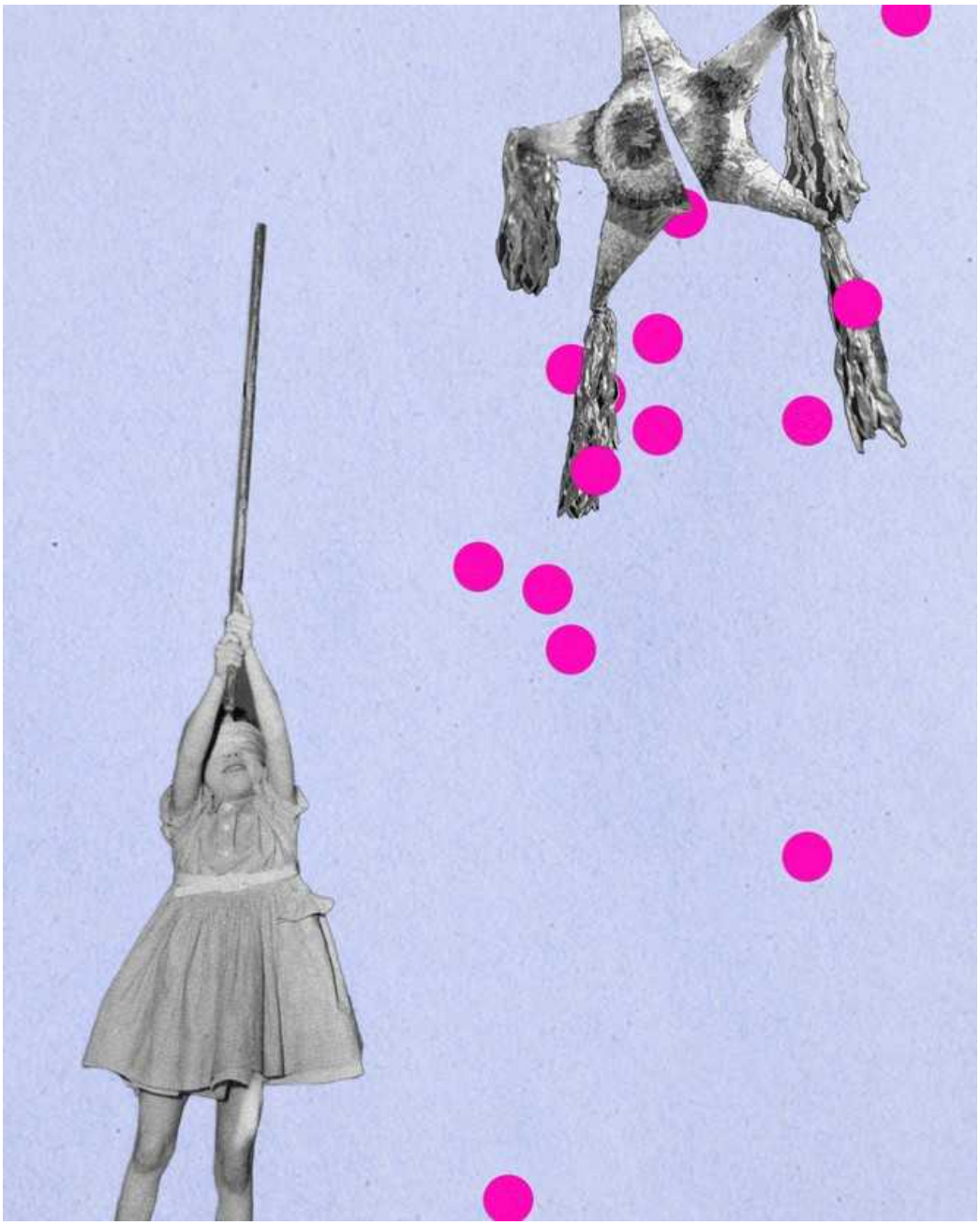
Poetry

- **Birthday**
  -- Kathleen Rooney
- **Pear**
  -- Erica Funkhouser

Birthday

Kathleen Rooney: ‘Birthday’

By Kathleen Rooney



At first, birthdays were
reserved for kings and saints.
But it’s rainbow sprinkles and
face painting for everybody
these days.

The best way to avoid having
your birthday ruined is to avoid

having any expectations for
your birthday.

Without the delineation of
years, time would become
an expanse of open water.
Horizonless, shark-filled. One
of my biggest fears.

A rush of Orange Crush—that
sparkle on the tongue—and
"Make a wish!" shouted at the top
of tiny lungs are a couple of things
I recall. Balloons and streamers
and the first piece of cake. Conical
hats with elastic chin straps.

Is a birthday party an instance
of what Durkheim meant
by *collective effervescence*?
Profane tasks cast away for
a sacred second?

Whence my ambivalence about
birth as a metaphor? Birth for
entities not brought forth from
a womb?

"Happy Birthday to You" is
a bit of a dirge.

It's said that the party hat may
have originated with the dunce
cap. An abrogation of social
norms? Not punishment in
school, but foolish cavorting.
Worn for the pinning of tails on

donkeys. The tossing of eggs.
Sported for a sack race.

Don't say "A star is born" unless
you're talking about the movie.
Don't tell a woman her books
are her babies.

For my next birthday, please
remember that I love getting
mail. You could send me a
funny card, and maybe a
package. A package full of
money. Or a necklace made
of lapis lazuli, believed by the
ancients to ward off melancholy.

What an ego boost, to have
one's birthday suit evaluated by
another person as cute.

"Today is the oldest you've ever
been, and the youngest you'll
ever be again." Supposedly
Eleanor Roosevelt said that.

I wouldn't say I have a problem
with mortality. If anything,
I tend to gravitate toward the
timeworn: a neighborhood
where the roots of the trees
crack the sidewalks.

Birthdays are about pleasure—
excess and decadence.
But pleasure is painful.
Because memento mori.

Because hoary cliché: We're
not getting any younger.

The candles gutter; the candles
go out. Better to blow them
dark yourself.

Birthdays are okay, but what
about death days? Of the
365 days we cycle through
annually, on one of them,
we'll cease to be alive.

Should the hour of arrival be
more of a factor? Should some
of us have birthnights?

Mayonnaise is my favorite
secret ingredient for cake,
birthday or otherwise.

There's no predicting the
days of greatest significance.
Best simply to be vigilant.
Like my friend Beth said, not
even trying to be wise, "In
my life, the piñatas come
around pretty quick—I just
swing at them with my stick."

This poem appears in the December 2021 print edition. When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Pear

Erica Funkhouser: ‘Pear’

By Erica Funkhouser

All fruits are not created equal.
In September the pear tree produces
an army of hard pellets tasting
of twine, of whining,
tasting of the word *but*.

What animal sprayed
its body’s bitter water
across this bark year after year?
Who knelt here to bury
amulets forbidding flavor?

Other pears require company
to produce fruit,
but this tree bargained

with the local devil:
Permit me to self-fertilize
and I shall forevermore
yield the inedible.

On a day when the world
is full of poison, this is
a good place to harvest wrath,
to spit venom and crush
any yellow protest
rising from the grass.
