

September 23 Dinner
By Mia Nussbaum

When Mrs. Ramsay's guests join her for dinner in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, nothing has shaped itself, nothing has merged; their talk is "scraps and fragments;" a "sort of rot." Mrs. Ramsay looks old and worn and remote; in their company, she feels the "sterility of men." William Bankes asks himself why the human race continues, "Is it so very desirable? Are we attractive as a species?"

Yet life shoots from the dining-room table and the candles compose the guests' mask-like faces into a play of light and a party. Lily Briscoe sees solidity vanish and some weight lift from each set of shoulders, each brow. Minta, who is in love, wears her "golden haze." And then there is the *Boeuf en Daube*, brown and savory in its bay leaves and wine. It is "a triumph;" Mrs. Ramsay cooked it right. A single tender piece partakes of eternity and opens onto "the still space...about the heart of things, where one could move or rest."

There are many such meals in literature and, if one is lucky, in life.

"Time itself had merged into eternity," Isak Dinesen writes in "Babette's Feast," where the guests, like those gathered around Mrs. Ramsay's table, are afforded a reprieve to their blindness and are given, in attending to that which is intricate and exists, some sight. They see. As old enmity unwinds, they see each other; and they see Babette, their foreign maid-of-all-work, for the great artist she is.

Putting down a spoon, Mrs. Ramsay glimpses something of time itself. She sees the blooms and tassels in a bowl of fruit; she sees the pressed tablecloth and she sees each face, each leaving face. "With her foot on the threshold," Woolf writes, She waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past.

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We do not eat slowly and together as often as we should. It is good, then, to practice.

On the Saturday before Ramadan began, Kiki Petrosino and I hosted a late-afternoon potluck at the Church St. House. We were expecting some variant on that humble word – conversation, a casserole. What we got was the good glimpse; what we ate was art.

Byoung-Yong Kim and Lou Ye picked apples from the tree in the front yard to add to my slaw. Doris Kareva chopped radishes. José Eugenio Sanchez spoke lovingly of cilantro. Choi Jeong Rye searched our kitchen for a pot that was worthy of her rice; she made do with what she found.

To make rice properly, Choi says, you need an electronic pot and Korean rice which is round and short-grained. Wash the rice three or four times. If you are a woman, press your hand on the top of the rice in the pot, and then pour water over your hand until your fingers are covered.

“Make a high fire until the water disappears and you hear a *cha-chock, cha-chock* sound,” she says. If you don’t have an electronic pot, you need a heavy, aged pot with a heavy, aged lid. Choi’s husband likes black rice best; she prefers brown mixed with white. The rice she gave us was sweetened with vinegar and garnished with sesame, sea salt and seaweed.

Mazen Sa’adeh chopped onions for Frieke, a bulgur soup that smells like a campfire and that was soon dubbed Smoky Delight. He roasted eggplant for a Baba Ghanoush that made people swoon.

Mazen learned to cook during his nine years as political prisoner in Jordan. The prison held around 1,000 men, ninety of whom were political prisoners. Mazen recalls that the institutional food was meager and “without any taste.” Early in his incarceration, he and the other political prisoners staged a hunger strike. They succeeded and were allowed to make their own food. Two men would serve the others: one cooking, one cleaning. As Mazen was the youngest prisoner, he spent the first two years on cleaning duty, apprenticing himself to various cooks as he did. He tells this story plainly; this is how he learned to make the olive oil meet the parsley and the parsley kiss the mouth.

Djamby Djusubaliev recruited men to chop two kilos of carrots and one and a half kilos of the fattiest, best lamb meat she could find. She put twelve whole, unpeeled bulbs of garlic in a pot full of rice and poured in the oil and turned on the heat. A few hours later, before she served her dish, she told us a story.

“Do you remember when Genghis Khan was going to invade the Occident?” she asked. People said they did. This is the dish he commissioned, she said. After eating it a man doesn’t need to eat for a week.

“It has carrots,” she said.

“Carrots! Carrots! Carrots!” José Eugenio shouted.

“It has garlic.”

“Garlic! Garlic! Garlic!” others joined.

While she was speaking Kim walked over and took a piece of lamb out the pot, smiled, and ate.

We all ate. We lingered. And then there was a request for a song. Kiki and I sang “The Water is Wide.” James Norcliffe and Ashur Etwebi joined me on “Bye Bye Blackbird.” Ashur waved crests and curls in the air as he and Mazen sang “Jaday al-Gazal.” José Eugenio and Rafael spun and stomped, making Spanish variations on an old theme – some stars, some moons, the shock of glimpsing some love’s eyes.