



## SOCIETY PAGES

# A Literary Party Where People Actually Like One Another

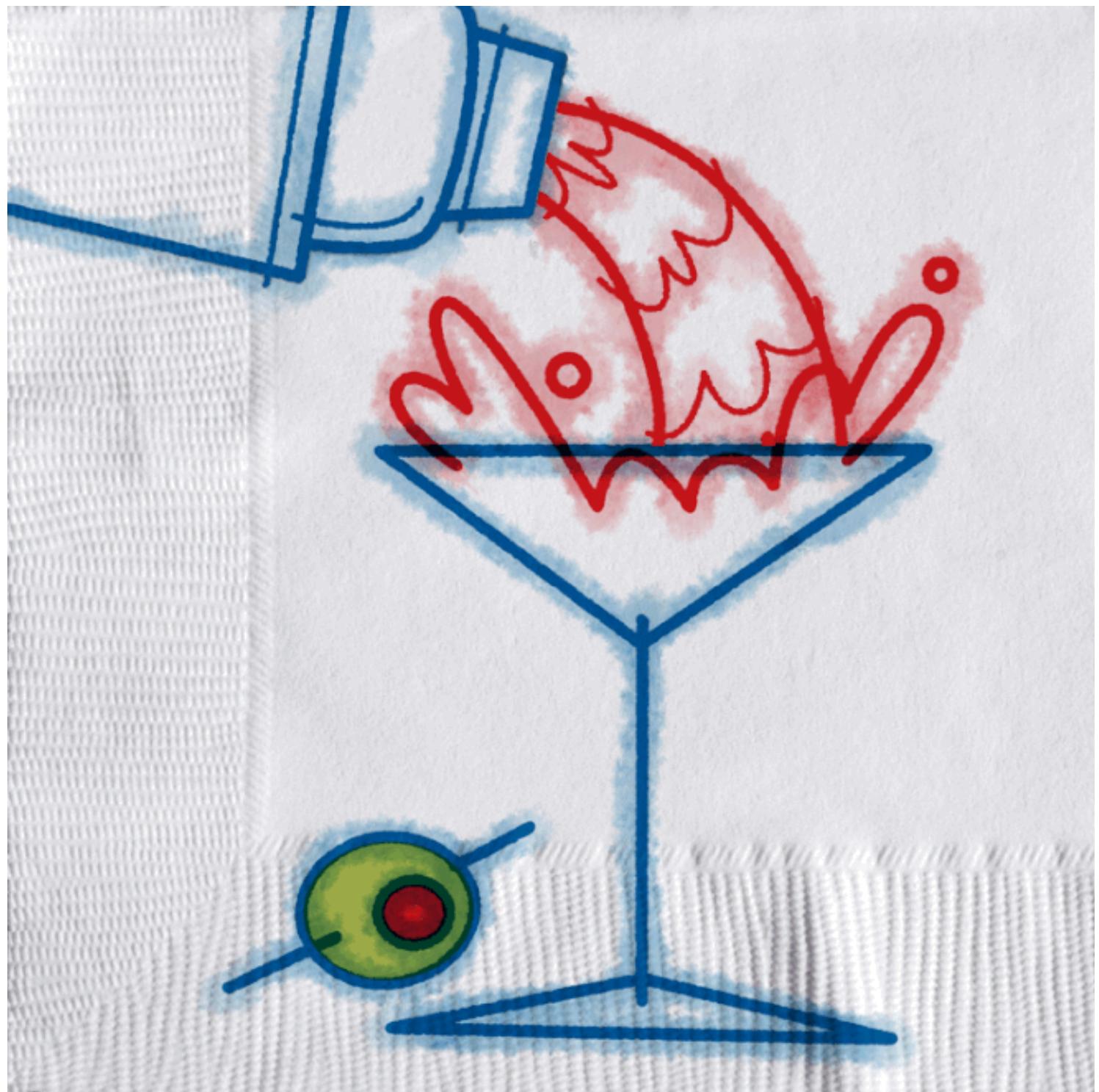


By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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Animation: The Cut

Three blocks from the Brooklyn Bridge, an unassuming event space drew in some of New York's literary darlings — and a few certified icons — for the duration of one humid Wednesday night. It was *n+1*'s Ultra gala, a celebration of the lit magazine's 20th anniversary, and if you happened to be strolling around Dumbo at the right moment, you might've spotted Fran Lebowitz just outside the entrance having a smoke a few feet from *There's Always This*

Year writer Hanif Abdurraqib and *Martyr!* novelist Kaveh Akbar, chopping it up with poet Angel Nafis among a small circle of well-dressed and well-read attendees.

The party took place inside a cavernous former metal factory dotted with round tables swathed in white fabric, each with its own floral arrangement and name cards assigning attendees' seats. Toward the back, partygoers gathered around the open bar to catch up. The dress code suggested "festive" cocktail attire, and the room was full of fun patterns in chic shapes; some wore keffiyehs draped over their shoulders or wound around their necks.

Unlike *n+1*'s past galas, which are typically cocktail parties, this was a dinner complete with passed apps and dazzling slices of salty honey pie from Four and Twenty Blackbirds for dessert. In appreciation of the magazine's dinner investment, I rated elements of the evening from 1 to 5 pie slices.

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## Atmosphere

One of the magazine's three editors, Lisa Borst, joked that the party felt pleasantly like a wedding reception in both the way the tables were set up and the feeling of camaraderie and joyous reunion that permeated the space. Later, I mentioned this to Abdurraqib and Akbar. "I'm getting married tonight, so thank you for coming to my wedding," said Abdurraqib. "Did you bring us anything?" asked Akbar. "We registered at Target." Considering they were wearing the same pair of black Nike sneakers, their coupledom was believable.

Jokes aside, it really did feel like most of the folks in attendance actually *wanted* to be there. For Abdurraqib and Akbar, it was just another chance to hang out. "I'm here tonight mostly 'cause Kaveh came," said Abdurraqib. "If someone asked us to mop the G train and Hanif was there, I'd be down to do it," replied Akbar. These two first connected in the good old days of the internet over a mutual appreciation for each other's poetry. Before either had published his first book, they formed a crew of Muslim poets and writers that also included Nafis, Fatima Asghar, and Safia Elhillo. Over the years, their friendships have woven into their work. "You can follow the breadcrumbs through our books," said Akbar. "There are definitely little whiffs of Fati in my book, and Safia and Hanif and Angel."

**Rating: 5 out of 5 pie slices.**



Photo: Katya Gimro

## Celebrity Esteem

Among the many literary icons in attendance — Mary Karr, Jia Tolentino, Rumaan Alam — there were also some New York icons: Martin Scorsese was Karr's plus-one, although I didn't end up spotting him, and Fran Lebowitz ventured out of Manhattan to be one of the meeting's honorary hosts. As luck would have it, just as she headed out for a smoke break, Lebowitz invited me to join her.

In the slightly cooler air out front, she turned to light her cigarette, lamenting the loss of indoor smoking. We agreed that the cocktail hour is the least-fun segment of any party. "The thing I don't like about this kind of thing — I see a lot of photographers in there. If there weren't, I'd sit down at the table," she told me. "I like to sit down or walk. I don't like to stand." I heartily agreed with her, and we chatted about basketball; her best friend is a WNBA superfan who persuaded her to go to her first Liberty game — even if it did involve traveling far from her home, much as she did for this party. "When I come to Brooklyn and I get out of the subway, I stand there like I have no idea where I am," she said. "And within two seconds, people ask me for directions. Really, do I look like I know? If I have to come to Brooklyn, I make someone send someone to meet me at the subway station."

It was time to head inside. I did a quick Scorsese scan on the way to my table. No dice. Still, just knowing he was in the room was enough.

**Rating: 4 out of 5 pie slices.**



Katya Gimro; Photo: Katya Gimro.

## Food

I arrived too late to fully enjoy the passed apps, but I spotted platters of watermelon chunks with a filling of some kind, polenta topped with short rib, crispy tofu, and tomato tarts, one of which I managed to snag as the server carrying them was heading back to the kitchen. When we sat down to eat, the author Christine Smallwood sat to my left and literary agent turned screenwriter Sam Freilich was on my right. Freilich is Tavi Gevinson's longtime partner, and she was seated on his other side, chatting with the writer Nicole Lipman.

I was pleased that, at least at my table, this was the kind of dinner where guests actually ate; the starter salad was gone before it reached me, and we cleared the platters of seared scallops, broccolini, and tiny roasted potatoes. All that was left was half a platter of hanger steak, and I have to assume I wasn't the only pescatarian at the table. Everything I tried was tasty, but the star dish of the evening was definitely the pie, served alongside hot tea and coffee.

**Rating: 3 out 5 pie slices.**



Photo: Katya Gimro

## Speeches

As we ate, the awards were presented: the Anthony Veasna So Fiction Prize, awarded to Siddhartha Deb, and the *n+1* Writers' Fellowship, awarded to *New York*'s very own Andrea Long Chu. Both received \$5,000. The winners gave short, good speeches; Deb joked that when he got the email, he thought he was being asked to be a judge for the prize, and Chu spoke about how being published in *n+1* was a catalyst for her career and urged everyone to give the magazine money: "As I understand it, they just lost \$5,000," she said.

Afterward, Mary Karr came up to give a longer speech about the founding of the magazine, its early days, and the influence it has had on New York's literary scene over the years. She referred to founding editors Keith Gessen, Benjamin Kunkel, and Mark Greif lovingly as "unknown knuckleheads with no money who'd come to raise money at the home of a single mother-poet-schoolmarm." She told the audience that the cost of this year's gala was double that of last year's because of the dinner element. "So if you want to keep the literary lap dances coming, then pony up," she said. Explosive applause followed.

**Rating: 4 out of 5 pie slices.**



Photo: Katya Gimro

## Conversation

During dinner, I mostly chatted with Freilich about Frank Ocean — we're both big fans — and he seemed genuinely interested in my recent trip to Bosnia; he and Gevinson have plans to visit her family in Norway this summer. Afterward, I congratulated Chu on the award and asked her how her night was going. "I'm a homebody, and it takes a lot to get me out of the house," she said. "Frankly, to go to an event where I get to wear the armor of celebrity, and I can talk to people and they can recognize me and I don't have to remember names — it's nice. At a regular party, I feel completely incapable of anything. I've come to this for many years, but it's nice to be insulated."

I congratulated Deb, too, and asked how he was feeling. "So embarrassed," he replied. "I don't get prizes; I'm not terribly social. But it's nice. I got to see some old familiar faces. And I got to meet Martin Scorsese. Yeah, my son is 18, so my street cred with him went up like that." He's been writing for *n+1* since almost the beginning and was enjoying the chance to reminisce about the early days.

Gevinson, who was hanging out near the coffee station, said she was having a great time. "I'm looking around at people I like, people I admire, people I don't know who are well dressed, and I'm happy to be celebrating the magazine," she said. "It doesn't feel like a work event." She's a longtime reader but not yet a contributor, although the magazine ended up publishing the open letter she and other Jewish writers and artists wrote against the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism after a different magazine declined to publish it at the last minute. "Everyone there was very invested in presenting it the right way and taking care of it," she said.

Toward the end of the evening, I chatted with Lipman and writer-filmmaker Lucy Rosenthal, who remarked on the unusually pleasant vibes we'd all experienced over the course of the

party. “I am in the room with the most famous people I’ve ever been in a room with, and yet I feel the least anxiety,” said Rosenthal. “I have all these little things I pick up on that I use as indicators of if you are annoying. It’s like, when you’re talking in a group, are people making eye contact with everyone in the group? If there’s somebody standing outside and you don’t really know them, are you turning your body to let them in or are you keeping your body away?” I told her I’d been welcomed with open shoulders. “An open-shoulder policy!” she quipped back.

**Rating: 5 out of 5 pie slices.**



Katya Gimro; Photo: Katya Gimro.

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