

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Isobel Harbison, "Old Food," *ArtReview*, January 16, 2020.

## ArtReview

### Old Food

Isobel Harbison digests a prodigious performance of Ed Atkins's ode to excess

By **Isobel Harbison**



Five days after the end of a general election campaign dogged by anachronistic notions of England, one white Englishman gets on stage to read a book by another white Englishman about the insatiable, long-time indulgences of a fictional white Englishman.

*Old Food* is a novel by Ed Atkins. Like its precedent, *A Primer for Cadavers*, the book was developed alongside an extended installation containing digitally animated videos, excerpted or co-authored texts mounted on different supports, and other props. Many of the works in the 2018 exhibition *Olde Food* at Cabinet Gallery, London were inspired by the artist's obsession with food: food represented in film, digitally rendered food, the curious digestibility of the digitally rendered and, more broadly, the substances, quirks or kinks that nourish or starve real bodies, that free or trap, unite or divide us. But in inverse relation to the subjects of Atkins' video portraits – largely silent, all crying – his novel's protagonist is self-satisfied and verbose, his appetites indefatigable, wistfully articulating various instances of past gratification.

Which is where the actor Toby Jones – better known for roles in *Infamous* (2006), *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (2011) and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018) – comes in, for a book launch at London's Conway Hall billed as 'a performance read-through in two parts'. From a chair onstage, this chameleon of an actor delivers a single, woozy, vocal run of the entire text. And the text is extraordinary, prickly and alert, filled cheek to jowl with descriptions of food and forks, dinners and diners, autumn harvests and darker yields, bodily excesses and abscesses, of orgies. Atkins' gluttony describes fagged chicken livers, garlic mosaics, dog-size spiders 'wildly dead', foiled bonfire potatoes, maggots 'moving fast like junior seed penises'. The greater the perversity of the language, the gutsier the auditorium's laughter at the narrator's schoolboyish reverence for spit-sodden pleasures. Occasionally there are vampires, and violence is everywhere: mum 'smashed about a bit till she made some fucking sense', a dad disinterred, someone's grandad stolen, then eaten outside a window. Hannah is the only named protagonist. She reappears often as girlfriend, mother, nanny, cook, sister, madame, whore, a trusted addressee into whom the narrator can pour whichever load, 'Dear Hannah, thank you.'

*ATKINS' GLUTTONY DESCRIBES FAGGED CHICKEN LIVERS, GARLIC MOSAICS, DOG-SIZE SPIDERS 'WILDLY DEAD', FOILED BONFIRE POTATOES, MAGGOTS 'MOVING FAST LIKE JUNIOR SEED PENISES'.*

The text is unanchored. Months, dates and days are mentioned but there's no sense to their sequencing. As listeners, we're thrown from images of medieval place-settings to beans-on-toast as seen through NHS specs. Through seasons, weathers, rains, through mud and shit and sunshine, the protagonist's appetite remains undiminished. If not for consuming the thing then for remembering the consumption of the thing, memory itself a heady consumption. Jones reads for two hours, shifting cadence to the text's undulations and accelerations, spitting out lists and clauses, pausing twice for water-sipping, never stopping. The reading's intensity is so pronounced as to be occasionally boring or, more accurately, hostile to attention. I miss the music in Atkins' installations here, a method of connection and a point of reprieve. Jones' tone veers wildly but his accent remains stable, never tipping too far from centre: we're stuck in this hellish omnivorous middle England, devouring anything or anyone to replenish itself through the ages. As dreams of a bygone England abound, *Old Food* performed a fitting if exhausting evisceration.

Ed Atkins' *Old Food* (2019) is published by Fitzcarraldo Editions