

Creative Nonfiction: People and Places  
WOC190  
Course Reader

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## CONTENTS

The Old House at Home (excerpts) .....	5
by Joseph Mitchell	
Short Cuts (excerpt).....	15
by Susan Orlean	
Here is New York (excerpts) .....	21
by E. B. White	
Orange Crush.....	25
by Yiyun Li	
Savoring a Sweet Taste of Southern Summers .....	29
by Rick Bragg	
The Mwiko .....	35
by Anonymous (student work)	
In a Louisiana Bayou Town, “Uncle Pat” Is the Law .....	41
by Rick Bragg	
The Man Who Eats.....	47
by Yiyun Li	
Mazie (excerpts).....	65
by Joseph Mitchell	
The Maui Surfer Girls (excerpt).....	79
by Susan Orlean	
“The Proverbs of Hell”(excerpts).....	89
by William Blake	
“I Remember” (excerpt) .....	93
by Joe Brainard	
Simon Leys on <i>Qi</i> .....	99
by Simon Leys	



## THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME

by Joseph Mitchell

(excerpts)

from *The New Yorker* magazine, April 13, 1940 issue

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version!*

1.

McSorley's occupies the ground floor of a red brick tenement at 15 Seventh Street, just off Cooper Square, where the Bowery ends. It was opened in 1854 and is the oldest saloon in the city. In eighty-six years it has had four owners—an Irish immigrant, his son, a retired policeman, and his daughter—and all of them have been opposed to change. It is equipped with electricity, but the bar is stubbornly illuminated with a pair of gas lamps, which flicker fitfully and throw shadows on the low, cobwebby ceiling each time someone opens the street door. There is no cash register. Coins are dropped in soup bowls—one for nickels, one for dimes, one for quarters, and one for halves—and bills are kept in a rosewood cashbox. It is a drowsy place; the bartenders never make a needless move, the customers nurse their mugs of ale, and the three clocks on the walls have not been in agreement for many years. The clientele is motley. It includes mechanics from the many garages in the neighborhood, salesmen from the restaurant-supply houses on Cooper Square, truck-drivers from Wanamakers's, internes from Bellevue, students from Cooper Union, clerks from the row of secondhand bookshops north of Astor Place, and men with tiny pensions who live in hotels on the Bowery

but are above drinking in the bars on that street. The backbone of the clientele, however, is a rapidly thinning group of crusty old men, predominantly Irish, who have been drinking there since they were youths and now have a proprietary feeling toward the place. Some of these veterans clearly remember John McSorley, the founder, who died in 1910 at the age of eighty-seven. They refer to him as Old John, and they like to sit in rickety armchairs around the big belly stove which heats the place, gnaw on the stems of their pipes, and talk about him.

2.

In his time, Old John catered to the Irish and German workingmen—carpenters, tanners, bricklayers, slaughterhouse butchers, teamsters, and brewers—who populated the Seventh Street neighborhood, selling ale in pewter mugs at five cents a mug and putting out a free lunch inflexibly consisting of soda crackers, raw onions, and cheese; present-day customers are wont to complain that some of the cheese Old John laid out on opening night in 1854 is still there. Adjacent to the free lunch he kept a quart crock of tobacco and a rack of clay and corncob pipes—the purchase of an ale entitled a man to a smoke on the house; the rack still holds a few of the communal pipes. Old John was thrifty and was able to buy the tenement—it is five stories high and holds eight families—about ten years after he opened the saloon in it. He distrusted banks and always kept his money in a cast-iron safe; it still stands in the back room, but its doors are loose on their hinges and there is nothing in it but an accumulation of expired saloon licences and several McSorley heirlooms, including Old John's straight razor. He lived with his family in a flat directly over the saloon and got up every morning at five; he walked to the Battery and back

before breakfast, no matter what the weather. He unlocked the saloon at seven, swept it out himself, and spread sawdust on the floor. Until he became too feeble to manage a racing sulky, he always kept a horse and a nanny goat in a stable around the corner on St. Mark's Place. He kept both animals in the same stall, believing, like many horse-lovers, that horses should have company at night. During the lull in the afternoon a stable-hand would lead the horse around to a hitching block in front of the saloon, and Old John, wearing his bar apron, would stand on the curb and groom the animal. A customer who wanted service would tap on the window and Old John would drop his currycomb, step inside, draw an ale, and return at once to the horse. On Sundays he entered sulky races on uptown highways.

### 3.

Old John was quirky. He was normally affable but was subject to spells of unaccountable surliness during which he would refuse to answer when spoken to. He went bald in early manhood and began wearing scraggly, patriarchal sideburns before he was forty. Many photographs of him are in existence, and it is obvious that he had a lot of unassumed dignity. He patterned his saloon after a public house he had known in Ireland and originally called it the Old House at Home; around 1908 the signboard blew down, and when he ordered a new one he changed the name to McSorley's Old Ale House. That is still the official name; customers never have called it anything but McSorley's. Old John believed it impossible for men to drink with tranquillity in the presence of women; there is a fine back room in the saloon, but for many years a sign was nailed on the street door, saying, "Notice. No Back Room in Here for Ladies." In McSorley's entire history, in fact, the only woman customer ever

willingly admitted was an addled old peddler called Mother Fresh-Roasted, who claimed her husband died from the bite of a lizard in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and who went from saloon to saloon on the lower East Side for a couple of generations hawking peanuts, which she carried in her apron. On warm days, Old John would sell her an ale, and her esteem for him was such that she embroidered him a little American flag and gave it to him one Fourth of July; he had it framed and placed it on the wall above his brassbound ale pump, and it is still there. When other women came in, Old John would hurry forward, make a bow, and say, "Madam, I'm sorry, but we don't serve ladies." This technique is still used.

[...]

4.

Old John had a remarkable passion for memorabilia. For years he saved the wishbones of Thanksgiving and Christmas turkeys and strung them on a rod connecting the pair of gas lamps over the bar; the dusty bones are invariably the first thing a new customer gets inquisitive about. Not long ago, a Johnny-come-lately infuriated one of the bartenders by remarking, "Maybe the old boy believed in voodoo." Old John decorated the partition between barroom and back room with banquet menus, autographs, starfish shells, theatre programs, political posters, and worn-down shoes taken off the hoofs of various race and brewery horses. Above the entrance to the back room he hung; a shillelagh and a sign: "BE GOOD OR BEGONE." On one wall of the barroom he placed portraits of horses, steamboats, Tammany bosses, jockeys, actors, singers, and assassinated statesmen; there are many excellent portraits of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. On the same wall he hung framed front pages of

old newspapers; one, from the London *Times* for June 22, 1815, contains a paragraph on the beginning of the battle of Waterloo, in the lower right-hand corner, and another, from the New York *Herald* of April 15, 1865, has a single-column story on the shooting of Lincoln. He blanketed another wall with lithographs and steel engravings. One depicts Garfield's deathbed. Another is entitled "The Great Fight." It was between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan, both bare-knuckled, at Still Pond Heights, Maryland, in 1849. It was won by Hyer in sixteen rounds, and the prize was \$10,000. The judges wore top hats. The brass title tag on another engraving reads, "Rescue of Colonel Thomas J. Kelly and Captain Timothy Deacy by Members of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood from the English Government at Manchester, England, September 18, 1867." A copy of the Emancipation Proclamation is on this wall; so, almost inevitably, is a facsimile of Lincoln's saloon licence. An engraving of Washington and his generals hangs next to an engraving of a session of the Great Parliament of Ireland. Eventually Old John covered practically every square inch of wall space between wainscot and ceiling with pictures and souvenirs. They are still in good condition, although spiders have strung webs across many of them. New customers get up on chairs and spend hours studying them.

[...]

*(In the part omitted here, Mitchell describes the history of the saloon and its four different owners down the years. Note: Kelly "the Floorwalker," mentioned in the following paragraphs, is a customer who spends most of his days in McSorley's and serves as a kind of volunteer waiter, even though he's not employed by the saloon.)*

5.

To a steady McSorley customer, most other New York saloons seem feminine and fit only for college boys and women; the atmosphere in them is so tense and disquieting that he has to drink himself into a coma in order to stand it. In McSorley's, the customers are self-sufficient; they never try to impress each other. Also, they are not competitive. In other saloons if a man tells a story, good or bad, the man next to him laughs perfunctorily and immediately tries to tell a better one. It is possible to relax in McSorley's. For one thing, it is dark and gloomy, and repose comes easy in a gloomy place. Also, there is a thick, musty smell that acts as a balm to jerky nerves; it is really a rich compound of the smells of pine sawdust, tap drippings, pipe tobacco, coal smoke, and onions. A Bellevue interne once said that for many mental disturbances the smell in McSorley's is more beneficial than psychoanalysis. It is an utterly democratic place. A mechanic in greasy overalls gets as much attention as an executive from Wanamaker's. The only customer the bartenders brag about is Police Inspector Matthew J. McGrath, who was a shot-and hammer-thrower in four Olympics and is called Mighty Matt.

[...]

6.

McSorley's bar is short, accommodating approximately ten elbows, and is shored up with iron pipes. It is to the right as you enter. To the left is a row of armchairs with their stiff backs against the wainscoting. The chairs are rickety; when a fat man is sitting in one, it squeaks like new shoes every time he takes a breath. The customers believe in sitting down; if there are vacant chairs, no one ever stands at the bar. Down

the middle of the room is a row of battered tables. Their tops are always sticky with spilled ale. In the centre of the room stands the belly stove, which has an isinglass door and is exactly like the stoves in Elevated stations. All winter Kelly keeps it red hot. "Warmer you get, drunker you get," he says. Some customers prefer mulled ale. They keep their mugs on the hob until the ale gets hot as coffee. A sluggish cat named Minnie sleeps in a scuttle beside the stove. The floor boards are warped, and here and there a hole has been patched with a flattened-out soup can. The back room looks out on a blind tenement court. In this room are three big, round dining-room tables. The kitchen is in one corner of the room; Mike keeps a folding boudoir screen around the gas range, and pots, pans, and paper bags of groceries are stored on the mantelpiece. While he peels potatoes, he sits with early customers at a table out front, holding a dishpan in his lap and talking as he peels. The fare in McSorley's is plain, cheap, and well cooked. Mike's specialties are goulash, frankfurters and sauerkraut, and hamburgers blanketed with fried onions. He scribbles his menu in chalk on a slate which hangs in the barroom and consistently misspells four dishes out of five. There is no waiter. During the lunch hour, if Mike is too busy to wait on the customers, they grab plates and help themselves out of the pots on the range. They eat with their hats on and they use toothpicks. Mike refers to food as "she." For example, if a customer complains that the goulash is not as good as it was last Wednesday, he says, "No matter how not as good she is, she's good enough for you."

7.

The saloon opens at eight. Mike gives the floor a lick and a promise and throws on clean sawdust. He replenishes the free-lunch platters with cheese and onions and fills a bowl

with cold, hard-boiled eggs, five cents each. Kelly shows up. The ale truck makes its delivery. Then, in the middle of the morning, the old men begin shuffling in. Kelly calls them “the steadies.” The majority are retired laborers and small businessmen. They prefer McSorley’s to their homes. A few live in the neighborhood, but many come from a distance. One, a retired operator of a chain of Bowery flophouses, comes in from Sheepshead Bay practically every day. On the day of his retirement, this man said, “If my savings hold out, I’ll never draw another sober breath.” He says he drinks in order to forget the misery he saw in his flophouses; he undoubtedly saw a lot of it, because he often drinks twenty-five mugs a day, and McSorley’s ale is by no means weak. Kelly brings the old men their drinks. To save him a trip, they usually order two mugs at a time. Most of them are quiet and dignified; a few are eccentrics. About twelve years ago one had to leap out of the path of a speeding automobile on Third Avenue; he is still furious. He mutters to himself constantly. Once, asked what he was muttering about, he said, “Going to buy a shotgun and stand on Third Avenue and shoot at automobiles.” “Are you going to aim at the tires?” he was asked. “Why, hell no!” he said. “At the drivers. Figure I could kill four or five before they arrested me. Might kill more if I could reload fast enough.”

8.

Only a few of the old men have enough interest in the present to read newspapers. These patrons sit up front, to get the light that comes through the grimy street windows. When they grow tired of reading, they stare for hours into the street. There is always something worth looking at on Seventh Street. It is one of those East Side streets completely under the domination of kids. While playing stickball, they keep

great packing-box fires going in the gutter; sometimes they roast mickies in the gutter fires. Drunks reel over from the Bowery and go to sleep in doorways, and the kids give them hotfoots with kitchen matches. In McSorley's the free-lunch platters are kept at the end of the bar nearer the street door, and several times every afternoon kids sidle in, snatch handfuls of cheese and slices of onion, and dash out, slamming the door. This never fails to amuse the old men.

## 9.

The stove overheats the place and some of the old men are able to sleep in their chairs for long periods. Occasionally one will snore, and Kelly will rouse him, saying, "You making enough racket to wake the dead." Once Kelly got interested in a sleeper and clocked him. Two hours and forty minutes after the man dozed off, Kelly became uneasy—"Maybe he died," he said—and shook him awake. "How long did I sleep?" the man asked. "Since the parade," Kelly said. The man rubbed his eyes and asked, "Which parade?" "The Paddy's Day parade, two years ago," Kelly said scornfully. "Jeez!" the man said. Then he yawned and went back to sleep. Kelly makes jokes about the regularity of the old men. "Hey, Eddie," he said one morning, "old man Ryan must be dead!" "Why?" Mullins asked. "Well," Kelly said, "he ain't been in all week." In summer they sit in the back room, which is as cool as a cellar. In winter they grab the chairs nearest the stove and sit in them, as motionless as barnacles, until around six, when they yawn, stretch, and start for home, insulated with ale against the dreadful loneliness of the old. "God be wit' yez," Kelly says as they go out the door. ♦



## SHORT CUTS

by Susan Orlean

(excerpt)

from *The New Yorker* magazine, May 1, 1995 issue

Robert Stuart ran away from home when he was a teenager, used to be macrobiotic, worries that Republican welfare reform might lead to urban violence, thinks Hugh Grant is good-looking but not amazing-looking, is a Nietzschean, has been faithful to his wife since they met seventeen years ago, and planned to become a social worker but ended up as a hairdresser. I know all these things because Robert mentioned them the last time he trimmed my hair. Most of what I've told Robert about myself I don't remember, but it ran deep. Robert cuts hair at his own shop, the Robert Stuart Salon, on Amsterdam Avenue at Eighty-fourth Street, in a skinny storefront about the size of a subway car, with strawberry-blond walls and five wide black barber chairs. The place has a pearly sleekness, but it's cozy. If you are sitting on the banquette near the door and you speak emphatically, someone having a hair wash in the back can answer you: Everything in the place is within earshot.

Robert, who is forty-three years old, has been in business on Amsterdam Avenue for fourteen years. For the first ten years, he was in a bigger space, a few blocks south. He moved into his current storefront four years ago. It was previously occupied by Mario the shoemaker, who now has a place up the block. I happen to patronize Mario, too, but our conversations rarely advance past the subject of rubber



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version!*

soles. This is not a reflection on Mario—who is affable enough, although he’s never run his fingers through my hair—as much as a reflection on my relationship with Robert and the kind of place he runs. It is a sort of salon of salons, an ongoing symposium involving Robert, his assistants, his clients, and whoever else walks in the door. The majority of Robert’s customers are professional people who live in the neighborhood or work nearby—somewhere between Lincoln Center and Columbia University. Many of his regulars are actors, dancers, writers, casting directors, art dealers, or youngish lawyers—people who appreciate stylish haircuts but need to look as if they could hold a job. Many of them are big talkers and don’t need much head massaging to open up to Robert or, as often happens, to one another. Robert himself may be the biggest talker of all. He turns out to be a perfect master of ceremonies, in a compact, ideally proportioned forum, in a neighborhood of chatterboxes, at a moment when the success of confessional television shows and call-in radio programs suggests that people are especially curious about one another and are full of their own opinions and raring to talk. Every time I’ve been in the salon, I have stepped knee-deep into a conversational current that moves swiftly from, say, spiritualism to cream rinse to Oedipal struggle. Between the gushing of his customers, the roaring of the blow-dryers, the trilling of the telephone, and Robert’s own conversational flow, the salon is a river of constant noise.

\* \* \*

Robert thinks women are great. Most of his clients are women, although he does cut hair for a lot of men. Whenever men are in the salon, they are expected to act like women—that is, to speak frankly and openly about personal,

intellectual, and political matters and, at the same time, make informed decisions about their hair. One day not long ago, Robert was saying that he felt that his cognitive identity was at least as much female as male, which meant, essentially, that he was paying himself a compliment. There were half a dozen people in the salon at the time, including his wife, Valerie, who was working that day as the receptionist. (Robert's regular receptionists are Nancy Bender, a singer who is sometimes hired to perform as a life-size Barbie doll at parties; Roberta Willison, an actress who was in London just then studying with the Royal Shakespeare Company; and Miguel Garcia, a former Eastern Airlines flight attendant who is between jobs.) Robert then said that he'd noticed that in his group-therapy sessions—he has been in every kind of therapy but likes group the most—the women were much more able to open up than the men, and that he considered his sentimental nature and his enthusiasm for conversation to be fundamental feminine traits. He happened to be cutting a guy's hair at the time, and he paused, with one hand steadying the guy's head forward so he could trim the fringe along his neck; his other arm was outstretched, and the needle-nosed silver scissors he held were glinting in the light. A few minutes earlier, Robert had been moderating a discussion of violence in film—he's against it—and saying how proud he was that his fifteen-year-old son hadn't liked *Pulp Fiction*. "Jeremiah and I walked out of *Pulp Fiction*," he'd said. "We went to see *Little Women* instead. I loved it. I cried."

GUY IN THE CHAIR: Really? I thought *Pulp Fiction* was great. Of course, I grew up watching violence on television.

ROBERT: See, I have a hard time with that. Don't you think we're becoming a society that is getting too used to violence? And humor with violence—that really scares me.

I don't want to go too, too short in the back today. On the other hand, if it's short on top and too bushy in back, it gets sort of Brooklynish—you know what I'm saying?

GUY: Definitely. The Pentagon did a study of bombardiers in the Gulf War—

WOMAN IN THE NEXT CHAIR (Having highlights done, her head bristling with tinfoil leaves full of hair dye): I heard about that study and—well, I'm a television producer, and it makes me really think about my profession and its role in where society is going.

ROBERT: You know, since you're in such a powerful industry, in television, you really affect people's lives. I envy that. Making an impact, that's what it's about, isn't it? Sit still—I'm going to go over your sideburns now.

\* \* \*

Robert is short, wiry, and jaunty. He has bright brown eyes, olive skin, and thick, glossy, highly manageable dark hair, which he wears loose and longish, so it hangs over his ears. Ninety-nine percent of the time that Robert and I have spent together, I've been dressed in one of the shop's black floppy robes. A hundred percent of the time, he's been wearing a pair of cotton-twill pants and a rayon camp shirt—usually vintage, and usually the kind that Ricky Ricardo wore around the house on *I Love Lucy*. He owns one suit. I know this because one day the subject came up while he was cutting the curly blond hair of a woman who teaches law and researches feminist legal theory at Columbia.

ROBERT: So, you just got married, right? Tell me about it. How was the wedding? How was your family? Were they supportive? It's so interesting to me that you had a real seriously traditional wedding. Do you think tradition is coming back?

LAW PROFESSOR: You know, I really wonder. I never thought I'd want that kind of wedding, but it really mattered. I thought I'd feel funny, but I didn't. It was great.

ROBERT: I love ceremonies. When our kids were born, we had everything—a bris, a baptism, everything. After I'm done today, I'm going to a Bar Mitzvah. I brought my one suit. It's like a joke in my family: Oh, here's Robert and here's Robert's one suit.

Everything Robert says, he says with overwhelming earnestness. In his presence, you feel that everything is important and everything is at stake—the direction of society, the length of your bangs, the quest for self-awareness. He is a stirring storyteller. His accent is memorable; it involves relocating r's whenever possible, in the old-fashioned New York way. He now lives in Tenafly, New Jersey, but he is a native of the neighborhood. He grew up twenty blocks north of the salon; his father owned a jewelry store on the Lower East Side.

Robert has a handsome, sturdy aspect, but he is also quite excitable. One day, several of us in the shop were talking about anxiety—someone getting highlights done started the discourse by saying she'd lately become insomniac—and Robert mentioned that he'd twice gone to the emergency room in a panic because he thought he was having a heart attack. The first time was when he had a steak after years of being macrobiotic; the heart attack turned out to be gas pains. The second time was before traveling overseas to meet his mother-in-law. Valerie is Filipino, and Robert figured her mother might have never before met anyone Jewish, and then he began obsessing over the possibility that while he was in the Philippines he would be kidnapped by zealous Christians who would try to convert him. This heart attack turned out to be pure anxiety. Robert has a restless mind and what used to be called a vivid imagination. He also happens to be dyslexic,

and recently he was found to have attention-deficit disorder. For several weeks after that diagnosis, ADD was the big topic in the salon, and many of his clients became convinced that they might be suffering from it, too. One day, I walked in while he was finishing cutting the hair of a country-and-western singer, who was describing how she, too, had trouble concentrating. Robert was snipping the last pieces around her ear. "I don't know," she was saying. "I just can't get focused. My mind goes back and forth."

"Exactly," Robert said. "I read the same page in a book over and over again."

Just then, the woman caught a glimpse in the mirror of the tableau that included Robert, his sharp scissors, and her temples. "You, um, can concentrate, can't you?" she said, suddenly rigid. "I mean, you're holding blades against people's heads all day."

"Me?" Robert asked. "Oh, not really. I can barely concentrate at all."

[...]

## HERE IS NEW YORK

by E. B. White

(excerpts)

1.

It is seven o'clock and I re-examine an ex-speakeasy in East 53rd Street, with dinner in mind. A thin crowd, a summer-night buzz of fans interrupted by an occasional drink being shaken at the small bar. It is dark in here (the proprietor sees no reason for boosting his light bill just because liquor laws have changed). How dark, how pleasing; and how miraculously beautiful the murals showing Italian lake scenes—probably executed by a cousin of the owner. The owner himself mixes. The fans intone the prayer for cool salvation. From the next booth drifts the conversation of radio executives; from the green salad comes the little taste of garlic. Behind me a young intellectual is trying to persuade a girl to come live with him and be his love. She has her guard up, but he is extremely reasonable, careful not to overplay his hand. A combination of intellectual companionship and sexuality is what they have to offer each other, he feels. In the mirror over the bar I can see the ritual of the second drink. Then he has to go to the men's room and she has to go to the ladies' room, and when they return, the argument has lost its tone. And the fan takes over again, and the heat and the relaxed air and the memory of so many good little dinners in so many good little illegal places, with



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the theme of love, the sound of ventilation, the brief medicinal illusion of gin.

[...]

2.

Another hot night I stop off at the Goldman Band concert in the Mall in Central Park. The people seated on the benches fanned out in front of the band shell are attentive, appreciative. In the trees the night wind stirs, bringing the leaves to life, endowing them with speech; the electric lights illuminate the green branches from the underside, translating them into a new language. Overhead a plane passes dreamily, its running lights winking. On the bench directly in front of me, a boy sits with his arm around his girl; they are proud of each other and are swathed in music. The cornetist steps forward for a solo, begins, “Drink to me only with thine eyes...” In the wide, warm night the horn is startlingly pure and magical. Then from the North River another horn solo begins—the *Queen Mary* announcing her intentions. She is not on key; she is a half tone off. The trumpeter in the bandstand never flinches. The horns quarrel savagely, but no one minds having the intimation of travel injected into the pledge of love. “I leave,” sobs Mary. “And I will pledge with mine,” sighs the trumpeter. Along the asphalt paths strollers pass to and fro; they behave considerately, respecting the musical atmosphere. Popsicles are moving well. In the warm grass beyond the fence, forms wriggle in the shadows, and the skirts of the girls approaching on the Mall are ballooned by the breeze, and their bare shoulders catch the lamplight. “Drink to me only with thine eyes.” It is a magical occasion, and it's all free.

[...]

## 3.

Walk the Bowery under the El at night and all you feel is a sort of cold guilt. Touched for a dime, you try to drop the coin and not touch the hand, because the hand is dirty; you try to avoid the glance, because the glance accuses. This is not so much personal menace as universal—the cold menace of unresolved human suffering and poverty and the advanced stages of the disease alcoholism. On a summer night the drunks sleep in the open. The sidewalk is a free bed, and there are no lice. Pedestrians step along and over and around the still forms as though walking on a battlefield among the dead. In doorways, on the steps of the savings bank, the bums lie sleeping it off. Standing sentinel at each sleeper's head is the empty bottle from which he drained his release. Wedged in the crook of his arm is the paper bag containing his things. The glib barker on the sight-seeing bus tells his passengers that this is the “street of lost souls,” but the Bowery does not think of itself as lost; it meets its peculiar problem in its own way—plenty of gin mills, plenty of flop-houses, plenty of indifference, and always, at the end of the line, Bellevue.

A block or two east and the atmosphere changes sharply. In the slums are poverty and bad housing, but with them the reassuring sobriety and safety of family life. I head east along Rivington. All is cheerful and filthy and crowded. Small shops overflow onto the sidewalk, leaving only half the normal width for passers-by. In the candid light from unshaded bulbs gleam watermelons and lingerie. Families have fled the hot rooms upstairs and have found relief on the pavement. They sit on orange crates, smoking, relaxed, congenial. This is the nightly garden party of the vast Lower East Side—and on the whole they are more agreeable-looking hot-weather groups than some you see in bright canvas deck chairs on green lawns in country circumstances.

It is folksy here with the smell of warm flesh and squashed fruit and fly bitten filth in the gutter, and cooking.

At the corner of Lewis, in the playground behind the wire fence, an open air dance is going on—some sort of neighborhood affair, probably designed to combat delinquency. Women push baby carriages in and out among the dancers, as though to exhibit what dancing leads to at last. Overhead, like banners decorating a cotillion hall, stream the pants and bras from the pulley lines. The music stops, and a beautiful Italian girl takes a brush from her handbag and stands under the street lamp brushing her long blue-black hair till it shines. The cop in the patrol car watches sullenly.

[...]

## ORANGE CRUSH

by Yiyun Li

from *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006

During the winter in Beijing, where I grew up, we always had orange and tangerine peels drying on our heater. Oranges were not cheap. My father, who believed that thrift was one of the best virtues, saved the dried peels in a jar; when we had a cough or cold, he would boil them until the water took on a bitter taste and a pale yellow cast, like the color of water drizzling out of a rusty faucet. It was the best cure for colds, he insisted.

I did not know then that I would do the same for my own children, preferring nature's provision over those orange- and pink- and purple-colored medicines. I just felt ashamed, especially when he packed it in my lunch for the annual field trip, where other children brought colorful flavored fruit drinks—made with "chemicals," my father insisted.

The year I turned 16, a new product caught my eye. Fruit Treasure, as Tang was named for the Chinese market, instantly won everyone's heart. Imagine real oranges condensed into a fine powder! Equally seductive was the TV commercial, which gave us a glimpse of a life that most families, including mine, could hardly afford. The kitchen was spacious and brightly lighted, whereas ours was a small cube—but at least we had one; half the people we knew cooked in the hallways of their apartment buildings, where every family's dinner was on

display and their financial states assessed by the number of meals with meat they ate every week. The family on TV was beautiful, all three of them with healthy complexions and toothy, carefree smiles (the young parents I saw on my bus ride to school were those who had to leave at 6 or even earlier in the morning for the two-hour commute and who had to carry their children, half-asleep and often screaming, with them because the only child care they could afford was that provided by their employers).

The drink itself, steaming hot in an expensive-looking mug that was held between the child's mittened hands, was a vivid orange. The mother talked to the audience as if she were our best friend: "During the cold winter, we need to pay more attention to the health of our family," she said. "That's why I give my husband and my child hot Fruit Treasure for extra warmth and vitamins." The drink's temperature was the only Chinese aspect of the commercial; iced drinks were considered unhealthy and believed to induce stomach disease.

As if the images were not persuasive enough, near the end of the ad an authoritative voice informed us that Tang was the only fruit drink used by NASA for its astronauts—the exact information my father needed to prove his theory that all orange-flavored drinks other than our orange-peel water were made of suspicious chemicals.

Until this point, all commercials were short and boring, with catchy phrases like "Our Product Is Loved by People Around the World" flashing on screen. The Tang ad was a revolution in itself: the lifestyle it represented—a more healthful and richer one, a Western luxury—was just starting to become legitimate in China as it was beginning to embrace the West and its capitalism.

Even though Tang was the most expensive fruit drink available, its sales soared. A simple bottle cost 17 yuan, a month's worth of lunch money. A boxed set of two became a status hostess gift. Even the sturdy glass containers that the powder came in were coveted. People used them as tea mugs, the orange label still on, a sign that you could afford the modern American drink. Even my mother had an empty Tang bottle with a snug orange nylon net over it, a present from one of her fellow schoolteachers. She carried it from the office to the classroom and back again as if our family had also consumed a full bottle.

The truth was, our family had never tasted Tang. Just think of how many oranges we could buy with the money spent on a bottle, my father reasoned. His resistance sent me into a long adolescent melancholy. I was ashamed by our lack of style and our life, with its taste of orange-peel water. I could not wait until I grew up and could have my own Tang-filled life.

To add to my agony, our neighbor's son brought over his first girlfriend, for whom he had just bought a bottle of Tang. He was five years older and a college sophomore; we had nothing in common and had not spoken more than 10 sentences. But this didn't stop me from having a painful crush on him. The beautiful girlfriend opened the Tang in our flat and insisted that we all try it. When it was my turn to scoop some into a glass of water, the fine orange powder almost choked me to tears. It was the first time I had drunk Tang, and the taste was not like real oranges but stronger, as if it were made of the essence of all the oranges I had ever eaten. This would be the love I would seek, a boy unlike my father, a boy who would not

blink to buy a bottle of Tang for me. I looked at the beautiful girlfriend and wished to replace her.

My agony and jealousy did not last long, however. Two months later the beautiful girlfriend left the boy for an older and richer man. Soon after, the boy's mother came to visit and was still outraged about the Tang. "What a waste of money on someone who didn't become his wife!" she said.

"That's how it goes with young people," my mother said. "Once he has a wife, he'll have a better brain and won't throw his money away."

"True. He's just like his father. When he courted me, he once invited me to an expensive restaurant and ordered two fish for me. After we were married, he wouldn't even allow two fish for the whole family for one meal!"

That was the end of my desire for a Tangy life. I realized that every dream ended with this bland, ordinary existence, where a prince would one day become a man who boiled orange peels for his family. I had not thought about the boy much until I moved to America 10 years later and discovered Tang in a grocery store. It was just how I remembered it—fine powder in a sturdy bottle—but its glamour had lost its gloss because, alas, it was neither expensive nor trendy. To think that all the dreams of my youth were once contained in this commercial drink! I picked up a bottle and then returned it to the shelf.

## SAVORING A SWEET TASTE OF SOUTHERN SUMMERS

by Rick Bragg

from the *Mobile Journal*, July 4, 1997

**MOBILE, Ala., July 3**— They put sweet iced tea in a can, now. Stores sell it in the soft drink section, beside 7-Up and Diet Coke and Evian. People pop the top and savor the brisk chemical bite and the imitation lemon aftertaste.

For some Southerners, the ones who grew up with iced tea brewed in gallon pickle jars by the loving hands of grandmothers and served over crushed ice in tall, sweating glasses, progress is a very, very sorry thing.

In the vernacular of the South of not so long ago, there was no such thing as sweet iced tea. There was just tea, always sweetened in a jug or pitcher with cane sugar, always poured over ice. In a region where the summertime air is thick and hot and still even when it's the dark, where people work hard and sweat rivers, hot tea was senseless and unsweetened tea was just brown ice water.

But now, say true believers in sweet iced tea, this most Southern of delicacies might be in its last generation, as younger people turn more to soft drinks and many of them do not even know how to make it. In time, it may go the way of poke salad and moonshine, a thing of museums and memory.

But down here on Mobile Bay, there is at least one lonely voice crying out, begging to still the hands of time.



*Read the annotated  
version!*

"It's an art," said Jay Grelen, a columnist for The Mobile Register who is trying to preserve the dignity and sanctity of sweet iced tea. "Now people drink it out of a can."

Mr. Grelen, born in Marianna, Fla., just south of the Alabama state line, persuaded his newspaper four years ago to sponsor a sweet tea-brewing contest, drawing contestants from, well, Alabama mostly. But it just may be sweet tea's world championship, because it may be the only contest there is -- at least the only one anyone knows of. In the past few years, it has been a part of the Fourth of July holiday, drawing as many as 40 contestants.

First prize is a handsome pewter pitcher.

"I've got my game face on," said Jean DeSchraver of Fairhope, Ala., who has tried every year and lost. "I am the Susan Lucci of iced tea contests."

The 40-year-old Mr. Grelen, whose columns on ordinary and extraordinary people have won him a broad following of readers, came up with the idea five years ago, after a hot and sweaty day of picking corn outside Mobile.

Mr. Grelen, covered in grime and sweat and all but faint from thirst, stopped at a sit-down catfish restaurant but realized he was just too dirty to sit inside. "I looked awful," he said.

"I sheepishly asked the cashier if I could buy a glass of sweet tea to go," he said. "She came back with a whole pitcher of tea, sat me on the porch in a rocking chair and refused to take any money. I was so struck by her kindness I nearly killed myself, because I felt obligated to drink every sip.

"I knew then that sweet tea embodies all that is good about the South and its hospitality. Life's too short not to enjoy, and it's too hot not to have sweet iced tea."

Mr. Grelen is no white-gloved scion of a rich Southern family trying to preserve mint juleps on the veranda and harp music in the hall. Sweet iced tea spanned race and class; it was one thing Southerners had in common, besides mosquitoes and creeping mildew.

Back when people sat on their porches and talked, back when they knew their neighbors' names, they did so with iced tea, in Mason jars, in antique leaded crystal, in Flintstones' jelly glasses.

People still do that, in some corners of the South, but not as much as before.

"It is a civilizing force in our society," Mr. Grelen said. "I love to sit and talk and drink tea."

Besides, he said: "I'm a Southern Baptist. I can't smoke. I can't drink. I can't cuss. And now I can't go to Disney World. So tea is the only vice left to me."

A generation ago, it was common to see it in baby bottles.

Byron McCauley, who writes editorials at the paper, may have summed it up just right. Iced tea, he said, "is the house wine of the South."

Mr. Grelen was so enamored with the place of iced tea in Southern society that he wrote a column about it, and asked people to send in their favorite iced tea recipes. The contest soon was born.

"I just got seven letters," he said, but he was struck with the feeling with which people described the tea and their experiences. Life itself was flavored by it.

"People who wrote," he said, "wrote poetry."

So what makes award-winning tea? In the beginning, Mrs. De Schriver tried to get fancy, adding passion fruit and nutmeg.

She caught the judges looking at it funny. One judge, she said, held a jar of it and stared at the bottom, as if trying to decide where those unique flavors came from.

"Now I just make plain tea with lots of sugar," she said. "I would love one of those pewter tea pots."

The winner is always basic tea, usually with water, tea and sugar, and skill.

"Major sugar, major lemon," said Scott Steele, whose tea, served at his Sonic Drive-In, is a local favorite. He also adds ice to the tea as soon as it is brewed, and keeps it at 40 degrees.

Mr. Grelen's recipe has a subtle twist.

He begins with a local brand of tea, Hill & Brooks, which is smooth, not bitter, he said.

He lets a half gallon of water come to a boil, then turns off the heat and puts in four quart-size tea bags.

He lets them steep for exactly eight minutes. He does not boil the tea.

Then he pours the hot, half-gallon of steeped tea into a jug of cold water, exactly one-half gallon, in which he has dissolved two cups of sugar.

Some people insist on putting the sugar into a boiling tea mixture, then adding cold water. He politely disagrees.

"It makes it a little bitter," he said.

The tea is better the second day. But he cannot resist draining several glasses as soon as it is done, and lets the rest sit in the refrigerator, where it mellows a little.

This year's competition, on the banks of the Mobile River at a downtown park, will also include a contest for best tea cakes. A mild controversy has arisen over what a tea cake is -- it is supposed to be a simple, vanilla-flavored cookie -- but it is a sideshow to the main event.

There is also a contest to see who can suck a bottle of tea the fastest through a baby bottle nipple.

Some traditions need to die.



## THE MWIKO

(student work, unpublished)

For a long time, nestled in a white drawer in our kitchen in Nairobi, there was a broken *mwiko*, a wooden cooking stick that looks like a cross between a spoon and a spatula. Nobody in my family remembers what caused its debilitation, but in its glory days this *mwiko* had been the size of my mother's arm from her wrist to her elbow. Smoothed to its final shape with sandpaper, the *mwiko* boasted different shades of light brown. When it broke, the part of the *mwiko* that looked like a rod and that you could wrap your fingers around when cooking *ugali* was almost half its original size. I must not have been the only one who had a hard time abandoning this *mwiko* for the new longer one whose contours my hand had yet to master, because my *mwiko* remained in the drawer, bedridden in the newspaper with which my mother made us line the drawers to keep off termites.

The first time Teddy and I saw my father using my *mwiko* is August 15, 1999. Dad had chased my ten-year-old brother out of our kitchen many times, telling him that men from the Luo tribe do not go into kitchens. Now we watched Dad bend over the dark green kerosene stove, using the *mwiko* he held in his hand to stir the mixture of maize flour and water. Mum was in Aga Khan Hospital, two hours away. She'd given birth to our brother Leon yesterday.

When we asked Dad if he knew how to cook, he replied, almost in admonishment, that of course he knew how to make *ugali*. Whenever we visited my grandmother, she never let either him or Teddy into the kitchen, and I wondered how Dad had learnt how to cook without entering kitchens. I thought about how he had gone to college in Mombasa, a city eight hours away from Nairobi. I decided that in Mombasa, in addition to nurturing the Afro we'd seen in photos like a dark halo over his head, an Afro which Dad would not let Teddy grow because he thought it unkempt, Dad had also learned how to cook.

Dad put water in a *sufuria*, an aluminium cooking pot. Then he sprinkled a pinch of flour into it so that the water would boil faster. After little air bubbles formed in the water, and then began to make a faint hiss, and then looked and sounded like the foaming geysers near Lake Baringo, he added more flour. He stirred the mixture with the *mwiko*, holding it the way one holds a spear rather than the way one holds a salad spoon.

Dad stirred the dough-like mixture around and around. He folded the bottom part over the top part. He split it into rough halves and turned one onto the other. The aim was to ensure that all the grains of flour mixed into the water so they'd look like dough rather than small dry mounds. The heat made the dough harder and harder until the point when Dad still stirred with ease, but a lot of people would have paused to dab their foreheads.

Real Luo *ugali* is hard. The other 43 tribes in Kenya eat soft *ugali*. But Luo *ugali* has to pass two tests. One: The scent of something that is starting to burn must envelop the household before the *sufuria* is removed from the stove. At that time, the dough that has stuck to

the sides of the *sufuria* will have turned crusty and be easy to peel off. Two: The cook must pinch some of the hot dough between thumb and two fingers, mold it in the palm so it looks like a white jawbreaker, and throw it at the tiles on the wall. It should not stick.

Dad covered the *sufuria* with an upside-down plate. He turned it over. The *ugali* peeled and landed on the plate. He removed the *sufuria* and Teddy and I looked at the *ugali*. Luos believe that if the *ugali* lands split down the middle rather than as a single mound of dough, it foreshadows a death within the household. (If this is true, then I can promise that it does not apply to split *ugali* that you force quickly back together by using the *mwiko* and smoothing the surface before anybody sees your mistake.) I had never seen Dad cook before, and though he'd told us when we walked into the kitchen that of course he knew how to, I hoped that his *ugali* did not *barore*. That is the verb for splitting, to *barore*. Doesn't it remind you of muted explosions?

Dad's *ugali* was perfect.

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Whenever I leave my home in Nairobi and go to Western Kenya, which Dad considers home, I see all the relatives with whom I would share a household if this were still pre-colonial Kenya. All of my mother's sisters are my mother. All of my father's brothers are my father. We introduce ourselves by saying whose children we are, and who our parents' parents are. When I shake hands with old grandmothers, I have to bend because they are seated and I am standing, and also because my Luo is not as good as my Swahili or my English and I have to be close

to catch everything they said. Also, many of them can't see past what is right in front of them. When they say hi to me, and they spit on my forehead as a blessing, they interrupt my introduction, saying: Of course, you are Rom's daughter. You do not need to tell me.

I take after my dad in more ways than they would wish, though, because I do not do kitchens either. In between the where-I-live-and-what-music-do-I-like on first dates, I often tell men, dishonestly, that I do not cook at all. The phrase for a woman getting married in Luo translates directly to "she has gone to cook." Before my mother was recognised as my father's wife, she lived with him for more than half of her life and had five children. What she had not done, though, is cook *ugali* for my father and his brothers over an open fire that she had to start herself. I once joked with my mother that I would not get married to a Luo man (a man "marries" but a woman "gets married"). She told me that every culture has its ways of muting its women.

I delayed my first meeting with the *mwiko* for as long as I could. I avoided the kitchen drawer that was first at my forehead level, then at chest level, and finally at waist level. The drawer has a pattern on it that looks like an inverted clothes hanger. If you hold the white and gold plastic handle and open it, you will find the *mwiko*.

When my mother finally cornered me into making *ugali*, I went through the motions of driving the *mwiko* around and hoped that my *ugali* tasted awful. I thought of the dipping motion that earned the *mwiko* its Luo name, *oluthni*, and the sloshing sound, and it made me think of the movement of gumboots in mud. My father often came home late from work or from drinking with his friends, and my older sister always had to make his

*ugali* when he got back. (*Ugali* must be served hot and fresh. No microwaving. Leftovers must be given to my father's chicken.) In fact, whoever is cooking must account for *ugali* for my father's chicken. Otherwise, he will ask who cooked and take the *ugali* from that person's plate and take it to his chicken, saying, "If you thought my chicken could sleep hungry, you can sleep hungry too." This just means that you have to go back to the kitchen and cook more *ugali*.

When my *ugali* turned out all right, I was scared that I would have to share my sister's misfortune of cooking *ugali* in the middle of the night.



IN A LOUISIANA BAYOU TOWN, "UNCLE PAT" IS THE LAW

by Rick Bragg

from *The New York Times*, April 19, 1995

**JEAN LAFITTE, La.**— This town, surrounded by swamps, has one road in, one road out. If Police Chief Clarence (Uncle Pat) Matherne parks his police cruiser sideways across it, it is a dragnet.

Crime fighting is not much more complicated than that in Jean Lafitte, a town of about 2,000 people -- including a considerable number of first and second cousins -- just 30 minutes south of New Orleans. The Chief cannot remember the last time this town had a killing. And armed robberies, drive-by shootings and other ugly things happen to other people, not to his people.

That does not mean there is no crime here. The other day, when the Chief was getting ready to go fishing, the police dispatcher ruined what was shaping up to be a good day.

"Chief, you better get on down here," the dispatcher said. "It's them Vinnetts. They got into a fight at their momma's funeral, and now they're going to settle it with shotguns in the graveyard."

That was quickly followed by a call from the town's undertaker, who confirmed the dispatcher's fears. "Pat, I think there's liable to be gunplay," he said.



*Read the annotated  
version!*

Chief Matherne, a rail-thin, 59-year-old man with a thick Cajun accent and long gray sideburns, handled it the way he handles most crime.

"I talked nice to de boys," he said, and defused the situation.

"Uncle Pat," as some residents and even some criminals call the Chief, is more than the law in Jean Lafitte. He is also its conscience.

Suspected thieves, after a visit and talking to from the Chief, have been known to bring stolen merchandise and leave it at the Town Hall, which houses the two-room Police Department. Then they wait outside with their chins on their chests, morose, until he decides whether to send them to jail.

And it is not unusual for him to find a stolen outboard motor in the driveway.

"You see, babe (the Chief calls everybody babe), it's like this," he said. "I feel that if I just talk to de boys -- and they're not bad boys -- it's better than just banging them against the wall."

It is an often-misused cliché, when people talk about small towns, to say that everybody knows everybody else. But in Jean Lafitte it is more likely to be true. Dry ground is at a premium here in a town that is seven miles long but only a few hundred feet wide, so people know one another, and see one another up close.

Uncle Pat, who lives on Matherne Street and ran a propeller shop for 30 years, knows almost everyone. He has only been the Chief for four years, but he has been an observer of his community all his life. When there is a small breakdown in its character, he knows which tiny shack or mobile home to call on.

His style is a mixture of familial kindness and no-nonsense authority. He has never had to draw his shiny .38-caliber revolver, and has never even had to get rough with a man. But he is capable of it. He swung a 10-pound hammer much of his life, battering ship propellers into shape.

The Chief's biggest weapon is trust. Thieves know he will treat them like misguided children. He may file charges -- often, he does not -- but he will not talk down to them.

"We've had people who say, 'I'll turn myself in, but I ain't going to talk to nobody but Uncle Pat,' " said Sgt. Mary Jo Hargis, the other half of the town's two-member department.

The most startling example of the Chief's insights and influence came earlier this year, when a woman reported that thieves were stripping aluminum siding off her boathouse.

"She was riding down the road one day and saw this truck go by, and said, 'That looks like my damn aluminum!' " the Chief said.

He had a pretty good idea who one of the thieves was, he said, and he went by to have a talk.

The man confessed, and said he had accomplices. The Chief ordered him to round up the accomplices and appear at his Town Hall office at 2 o'clock the next afternoon.

At precisely 2 P.M. the next day, six men arrived and turned themselves in. Over the next few days, a total of 13 men confessed to the thefts.

"They may lie to me for a little while, but not for long," Chief Matherne said.

It seems like effortless police work, but it broke his heart a little, too. Some of the men brought their families with them, to wait in the Town Hall lobby. The sight of children always bothers him, he said.

"They say, 'Uncle Pat, I had to do it because my babies was hungry.' I say, 'You don't like to work too damn much, that's why you did it.' "

The bayou is not a rich place, populated mostly by fishermen and workers in what is left of the oil industry. Stealing has been a part of the culture for more than 200 years, but it was once done on a much grander scale.

This town, on the edge of Bayou Barataria, is named for the French pirate Jean Lafitte, who helped Andrew Jackson and his army of sharpshooters defeat the British in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Now the stealing involves mostly outboard motors and fishing boats.

"You steal something like that, you take away a man's living," the Chief said. "What does he tell his wife?"

Chief Matherne takes theft seriously, but he seems to despise drug dealers. If he suspects someone of dealing drugs, he parks his cruiser in their driveway at night and just sits there.

"They move on out," he said, sooner or later.

He became Chief because friends encouraged him, he said, and because he had always wanted to try it. He does not mind that some days his department does not even get a call. And when it does it may only be about another alligator that is stuck in a culvert outside the car wash, and that has to be lured out with catfish entrails.

"If I had been a younger man when I got started, I would have liked to have been a detective," he said, looking almost wistful.

Friends and other law-enforcement officers in the bayou country say he is a detective.

His dedication is unquestioned. He cannot remember his last day off. "I can't even go fishing," he said.

He never knows when violence will erupt at another graveside service.



## THE MAN WHO EATS

*What my grandfather taught us about hunger.*

by Yiyun Li

from *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2004

The God of Lightning does not hit the man who eats, my grandfather often said when we were young. The lesson? Eating was a virtue. Grandpa could go on for hours citing Confucius and his disciples on the merit of eating. Sometimes, to make us appreciate food more, he told my sister and me hunger stories. A poor scholar went to a banquet and saw sesame seeds scattered on the table. "Let me teach you calligraphy," the man said to the guests, after which he licked his forefinger and wrote like a master on the table, cleaning up the sesame seeds as he went. A poor man from a village visited a rich friend in the city, according to another story, and the friend invited him to a fancy restaurant, ordered a cup of tea, and asked him politely to help himself to all the good smells. Grandpa also told us tales about a famine in the fourteenth century, when neighbors traded their children so they would not have to cook their own sons and daughters. They started with the youngest in the families, Grandpa explained, because the little ones knew nothing and would not be afraid.

The last story both frightened and enchanted me. Throughout my childhood, food was always in short supply and rationing was never-ending, but famine, a

word with a dangerous appeal, was a mystery. I was about four years old when my grandfather first told me the story, and, as the youngest, I imagined my parents trading me for the boy next door. He was my age but bigger and fatter—a good deal, then, for my family. Knowing that I would be the one sacrificed in a time of famine, I felt important, grown-up, and sad. I studied the tins of crackers and cookies that Grandpa kept on top of his bookcase and wondered if I deserved a treat because of what I would do for the family. Grandpa shared a bedroom with my sister and me. Our room was about a hundred square feet. It had two beds and the furniture that Grandpa had brought from his previous residence: a sturdy desk and a big wooden bookcase. If I stood on the edge of the double bed that my sister and I shared, it would take only a small hop for me to land on Grandpa's single bed; I could then climb onto the desk from his headboard, and from there it would be easy to reach the tins on the top shelf. But we were not allowed to take the hop to start the intrusion. Everything Grandpa owned was too precious for us to touch. On his desk were brushes of all sizes, an inkstone, a stack of rice paper for painting and calligraphy, a bronze paperweight and a marble one, and a lamp with a bridge and a pavilion exquisitely carved into the base; in his bookcase, the books were brittle and yellow, bound with strings that had come loose. The only unbreakable objects were the cracker tins, and the bags of gourmet pickles, also kept out of our reach, that he bought on monthly trips to an expensive store. He ate his snacks alone.

When Grandpa was in a good mood, he taught us to recite poems written during the Tang dynasty, between the seventh and the tenth century. Once in a while, he

sneaked his own poems into the curriculum and gave us each an animal cracker whenever we memorized his work. My sister, who was four years older, taught me to put the cracker in a glass of water to make it grow. Together, we watched the rooster or the elephant become fat, and then we scooped it out carefully with a spoon. Sometimes we were too greedy and let the crackers stay in the water too long; at the first touch of the spoon the cracker would disappear, a phenomenon that puzzled me for the longest time during my childhood.

On Sunday afternoons, my parents often had to take part in required parades—my father, who was a physicist, with his research institute, and my mother, a teacher, with her school. It was the middle of the nineteen-seventies, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, and it seemed that there was always a parade on Sunday in those years, to celebrate a new policy of the Party, or the recent publication of a poem of Chairman Mao's. Sometimes the call for a parade came on a weeknight, and it would last until the small hours of the morning. My parents spent little time with me during the week, and I was expected to be in bed not long after I got out of day care. On weekends, however, their absence meant that I had to stay with Grandpa. On one such afternoon, my sister and I woke from a long nap, our limbs heavy with hunger and despair: the early dusk of winter had settled in. The marching tunes from the street were loud and distant at the same time. The central heating for the apartment building wouldn't be turned on until after suppertime. Grandpa sat by the lamp and read, the shadow of his head big on the wall. My sister and I held hands under the blankets, and could not get up. Even now,

the dim and useless hours before supper on winter afternoons depress me.

Eventually, Grandpa realized that my parents would not be back for some time, and we were all hungry. He went into the kitchen and after a few minutes he returned to the bedroom with a bowl of soup for himself and a bowl for us. The soup was made with a pot of boiling water, two scoops of lard, and a spoonful of soy sauce; it arrived with floating oil drops, golden with shining rims in the orange lamplight. My sister and I hurried out of bed and blew on the soup carefully to cool it. The oil drops swam in happy circles, and life, suddenly, was as good as a cracker in water, swelling with hope.

My grandfather was born in 1897, the only son of a silk and fabric merchant in a small town near Shanghai. His parents, who were relatively wealthy and very farsighted, sent him to both an old-fashioned Chinese school to learn to write poetry—the most important education for any learned man—and a Western-style middle school and high school, still a rarity in the early years of the twentieth century, and far beyond the requirements of the heir to a fabric shop. When he graduated from high school, he became one of the few intellectuals in his home town, and taught at a boys' school for a few years. When he was in his early twenties, he went to Shanghai to seek a career in publishing. He passed a series of exams to become an apprentice in the Commercial Press of Shanghai, one of the first Western-style publishing houses in China. When we were young, he liked to brag about the competitiveness of the exams. In his version of the story, one young man whom he beat was Lu Xun, who later became one of the country's most famous writers. Lu Xun had to become a writer, Grandpa

claimed, because there were no other opportunities for him in publishing.

Grandpa married his first wife around the time he moved to Shanghai, but she soon died in an inexplicable manner: she hanged herself a few days after giving birth to her first child. An old acquaintance from his home town heard the news and cabled him, offering his younger sister, the most beautiful of nine siblings, as a wife. My grandfather married her, and she became my grandmother.

Of the few early pictures I have of him, the oldest is a yellowed passport photograph, taken in the nineteen-thirties. He is wearing a suit and tie, and glasses with round lenses, and he has an expression of aloofness, or perhaps of arrogance. He had ascended to an editor's position by then, and he was in the prime of his life. When I was a child, our relatives from the South described him as a man with a thin, gilded walking stick in one hand and a fedora in the other. Sometimes he spoke English to his fellow-citizens; he enrolled his younger boy in a healthy-baby contest sponsored by a company that imported expensive dairy products from Britain, and when the baby won a large picture of him was printed in the newspaper ads; he took his family to overnight mah-jongg parties and let his three sons fall asleep in a heap in the guest room, while he played rounds and won money. For a few years, he and his family lived in luxury. His parents' shop was no longer a lure for him to return to his home town.

Then his luck changed. The child who had won the healthy-baby contest died of diphtheria, and my grandmother, at the sight of her son's body, went crazy.

A year later, she gave birth to her last baby—my mother—but she never regained her sanity.

Soon, the Japanese invasion drove them out of Shanghai. My grandfather joined the Kuomintang—the Nationalist People's Party—and served in the Army as an advisory staff member. He took his family with him from province to province, never settling down long enough to make a home. He sent his two sons to military academies. By the time they graduated, the Second World War was over, and the Communists were the enemy. The three of them fought in the civil war on the Kuomintang side from 1945 to 1949, and lost to Mao's army. His older son retreated with the Army to Taiwan; he and his younger son surrendered with their units.

After the Liberation, my grandfather was jobless for a few years because of the stain of being a Kuomintang officer. Finally, with the help of an old friend, he found a job at a publishing house in Beijing. He should have "tucked his tail between his legs," as the saying went for men like him, but he couldn't keep quiet. He said that Chairman Mao was the king of Hell and that the Party officials were the gate-guarding devils. That almost got him sent to prison. Instead, he ended up with an early retirement. Even more incredibly, he survived the ten years of the Cultural Revolution without once being beaten by the Red Guards. There were many sins for which he could have been tortured to death: he was an offspring of capitalists (his parents owned a fabric shop); a reactionary intellectual (he wrote poetry with traditional themes instead of praising the new proletarian regime); a counter-revolutionary remnant (he had been a Kuomintang officer); a hidden spy for the American imperialists (his oldest son was in Taiwan, an

ally of America); and a blasphemer of our greatest leader, Chairman Mao. Tens of thousands of people were killed because they belonged to one of those categories, but my grandfather lived a happy and healthy life. By the time I was born, when he was in his late seventies, he had become a neighborhood legend. His hair had gone from sleek and black to almost snow white, but he went to the barber's regularly to have it trimmed; his back was straight, and even though he was only five feet two he seemed to tower over people who were much taller. He got up at five o'clock every morning and jogged for an hour; he wrote poetry and painted during the day. Instead of a gilded stick, he now carried a hand-carved wooden cane, but he rarely used it. He explained to my sister and me that once people saw an old man leaning on a cane they no longer had any interest in him. He carried the cane only to make strangers marvel at his age and his health.

Grandpa never stopped denouncing Chairman Mao. When my sister was in the second grade, she came home one day and recited a poem that she had been taught in school. It was written by Chairman Mao in response to Khrushchev's "goulash Communism." The poem's most famous line was "Stew the potatoes first; then add the beef. Don't sell your fart to us!"

My sister repeated the poem, and I giggled, saying the forbidden word too many times for my mother to remain quiet. "We know you can recite the poem," she said to my sister. "You don't have to repeat it forever."

"But you said a poem was to be recited as many times as possible," my sister said.

"A good poem, yes," my mother said.

"This is a poem by Chairman Mao."

“A bad poem by Chairman Mao,” Grandpa declared, and explained, line by line, why this was a bad poem: vulgar, unpoetic, horribly rhymed. It was why we needed a good poetry education, he said, so that we would not write like this.

My mother banged the windows shut, worried that people walking by would hear Grandpa. “Can’t you all shut up?” she finally said, losing her patience.

Grandpa ignored her. “Besides, beef-and-potato stew—what kind of food is that? Only a peasant could imagine putting this into poetry!” He then recited several poems for us, all with delicacies beyond Chairman Mao’s peasant imagination: fugu, the fish famous for its heavenly taste despite its deadly poison, swimming in springtime, the best season because its flesh was most tender; a single fisherman’s boat floating in the mist, waiting for the bass to bite; newly harvested oranges, cut open with a silver knife by the most beautiful prostitute in the Song dynasty, while the Emperor sat by the red lantern, waiting, and the prostitute’s lover hid beneath the bed, listening.

Nevertheless, Grandpa would have shared Chairman Mao’s love of beef-and-potato stew, if only we had had a ration of beef. We lived in the era of the planned economy. People’s salaries were determined mostly by how long they had served the country. My father and my mother earned about the same as people of their age in other fields. Almost everything was rationed: flour, rice, sugar, salt, oil, tofu, eggs, meat, fish, starch. Whatever wasn’t rationed became a treat. My sister drank soy sauce from the bottle; I sipped vinegar.

The only meat available on a regular basis was pork, and buying pork, like everything in our life, was a

perpetual dilemma. When the sales assistants were in a mean mood, they cut a chunk of fat for the ration. If they were in a good mood, they cut out pieces with little fat and more edible meat; but this presented another problem—there wouldn't be enough lard to supplement the small and unreliable oil ration.

To solve the problem, parents sent their children to buy the twenty-fen meat, a very thin slice cut from the pig's underbelly, which did not count as part of the meat ration. Every child my age grew up with the memory of standing in front of the greasy meat counter, asking for twenty-fen meat with a trembling voice. The slice was thrown across the wide cutting board, which was at a child's eye level. My sister and I took turns buying the pork—if the sales assistants saw you more than once a week, they commented aloud on your parents' sneakiness and stinginess with the ration.

Walking home with a limp slice of pork wrapped in old newspaper, the grease seeping through and darkening the printed words, I dreamed of becoming a sales assistant in a grocery store. Back at home, my father would carefully cut off the fat, saving it for later, and cook the rest of the meat with vegetables—to give the radishes and the cabbage a taste of meat, he said. When the serving bowl was on the table, Grandpa was always the first one to pluck out the few chunks of meat. My chopsticks got in the way of each other when I tried to fight him for a piece, and he was never generous enough to let me win.

When I had trouble swallowing a radish, Grandpa said, "You don't know hunger. If only you had lived through the three years of famine!"

Those years, between 1959 and 1961, were frequently invoked to demonstrate what spoiled children we were.

“People ate tree bark and grass roots,” Grandpa said. “People were murdered for a kilo of rice.”

“My mother’s silkworms, a full hut of them, were eaten overnight by hungry mice,” my father said. He came from a peasant family in southeast China, where the soil was so barren that nothing the family planted grew well. His mother reared four children and sent two sons to college and two girls to nursing school with the money she earned from her silkworms. “Then the mice were hunted and cooked up.”

My mother’s tale, the saddest of all, was that her mother, Grandpa’s crazy second wife, gave up eating so that she could save her ration for my mother. My grandmother died in the second year of the famine.

“The God of Lightning does not hit the man who eats,” Grandpa concluded. “If you don’t eat, nobody can help you.”

On Sunday mornings, I went grocery shopping with my father. He placed me at the end of the longest line, always at the egg counter, and then left to search for other things. The monthly egg ration for each person was half a kilo, and, most of the time, the store did not even carry eggs. Still, every Sunday we tried our luck.

I stood in line and watched the Sunday bustle. A man walked from line to line and told people that he had lost the ration book for his entire family, but they all shook their heads and turned their backs to him. On the street outside, people waited at a bus stop for the bus, which never came on time. When it finally pulled up, an older man on the other side of the street called out, “Wait,

comrade, please wait!" The conductor, a young man with a grin, stuck his head out the window and watched the man running toward the bus; just as he was about to reach the steps, the conductor shut the door. He waved goodbye as the bus pulled away.

As I watched the old man panting from his exertion, I started to weep. Two women standing behind me talked about what a softhearted kid I was. I dried my tears. When my father returned with other groceries, he took my place in the line and told me that I could wander around a little if I liked.

Instead, I pushed my way to the counter to watch the sales assistants. A female assistant weighed the eggs, and a man took the money and filled in the ration books. They stopped from time to time, exchanging jokes. "Look at you," the man said, imitating the woman's slow movement with the eggs. "You don't have to be so careful. They're not your eggs."

"Watch your filthy mouth," the woman said, and threw an egg at the man. He dodged, and the egg broke on the counter in front of me. The woman scooped up the egg and flung it into a basin on the counter. I moved closer. Six yolks floated among the egg whites in the basin, and I swallowed hard. Broken eggs were sold at a higher price than whole eggs, but they did not count toward the ration.

The line moved slowly. Flies with green heads buzzed around the basin, and I shooed them away. The flies kept coming back, and I kept shooing them away.

"Comrade, may I buy those broken eggs there?" an old man asked. My heart beat faster. Those were our eggs. I had been the one to protect them from the flies.

The female sales assistant glanced at the old man and said, "No."

"But why, comrade?"

"Because I said so," the male sales assistant said.

"Because *I* said so," the female sales assistant said, punching her colleague in the chest.

I wished that they would stay in the same mood if anyone ahead of us asked for the broken eggs. I wished that they would change their minds when my father reached the front. I looked at the flies crawling on the sticky counter; too many wishes had made my heart full.

There were about ten people in front of my father when the male sales assistant rejected a ration book. "Today is over. We are not selling anymore."

People gasped. "But, comrade," someone said, pointing to the eggs behind the counter. "These have not sold out yet."

The man and the woman turned and walked to the back of the store arm in arm. People lingered, and when nobody came out to start selling again the crowd dispersed. Sunday after Sunday, the same thing happened, but at times, magically, a sales assistant would return after ten or twenty minutes. Then I ran quickly to the front of the reassembling line, and, if we were lucky enough to have a good-humored sales assistant, I followed my father home and stared at the broken eggs, their beautiful yellow yolks bouncing in the plastic bag, so full and heavy. We did not have a refrigerator at home, and for dinner we would have a plate of scrambled eggs.

On those nights, with a big chunk of scrambled egg between his chopsticks, Grandpa would tell a story. "A villager went to the city and entered a restaurant," he began. "On the menu, he saw a dish called Fried Gold. This

sounds good, he thought, so he ordered it. When the waiter came with a plate of scrambled eggs, he was at first enraged and then excited. He ran back home to his wife and said, 'Stop toiling, woman. We are rich now. Do you realize that our hens lay gold?' "

Grandpa told the same story over scrambled eggs again and again, until one day I was old enough to pity and despise him. From where he sat gobbling, he could make fun of people, all idiots in his eyes, and he could recite poetry and criticize Chairman Mao, but he did not understand the hardship behind even a plate of scrambled eggs. What we ate was at the mercy of other people. Eating, instead of being a pleasure, became a burden to me.

One day, I found a book in Grandpa's collection, describing different ways of meditating. The method I found most attractive was used by nuns in ancient times: by controlling their breathing, they could stop their menstruation and limit their need for food. I was eleven or twelve then, and I thought that nothing would be better than to get rid of all the troubles that weakened one's body. The nuns' meditation became my secret practice in the late afternoons, before my parents returned from work and my sister came home from middle school. Grandpa was always eating snacks while I sat cross-legged on my bed. My stomach grumbled, yearning for the share that he would never give me.

My grandfather did not lose his appetite until the very end of his life. He jogged until he was in his late eighties; once he could no longer run, he took long walks, still refusing to lean on his cane. The God of Lightning does not hit the man who eats—he was living proof of his own

belief, this man with a good stomach and extraordinary luck.

It has taken me many lengthy conversations with my mother to understand how my grandfather managed to escape persecution. Once, in the nineteen-thirties, a colleague asked him to help bail a leftist poet out of jail. He did, and afterward was said to have taken the poet to a fancy restaurant and treated him not only to a cup of good tea but also to a full meal. Twenty years later, the poet became a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Culture; when my grandfather made his infamous comment about Chairman Mao, the poet arranged for his early retirement.

Eating had saved him from the labor camp, but it almost derailed him, too. In 1962, after the famine finally ended, my grandfather joined a Saturday lunch club and dined there weekly with a group of retired editors. He met a woman his age, and they fell in love. When he finally brought up the topic of marriage, my mother and her siblings were scandalized. A man his age!

In the same year, my father was introduced to my mother as a possible match. The first time they met, at her house, my father—a peasant's son and a new arrival in Beijing—asked for a second bowl of noodle soup. My mother was appalled; a polite guest would rather starve than ask the host for more food. My grandfather, however, approved of the match—this was a man who ate! He also consulted a number of history books and decided that my father's family, generations of peasants as they had been, were direct descendants of the emperors of the Tang dynasty.

My grandfather's marriage never took place, because of his children's vehement opposition, but he happily

married my mother off in 1966. To save on rent, or perhaps to escape heartbroken memories, my grandfather left his old house and moved in with my newly wedded parents, who were living in a highly secured complex, where my father and other young scientists worked for a research facility to develop nuclear weapons. Later that year, the Cultural Revolution began, and hundreds of old intellectuals were beaten, whipped, kicked, and killed in public by the Red Guards. My grandfather would have met the same fate if he had married and continued to live in the old neighborhood. Moving in with my parents, however, proved to be the wisest decision he had ever made: because of the importance of the research institute to the national defense system, Red Guards were never allowed to enter our complex.

My grandfather died in 1987, just as the relationship between Mainland China and Taiwan began to thaw, and soon after he received a letter from his oldest son for the first time in nearly four decades. My grandfather lived through three regimes, two world wars, two civil wars, famine, and revolution. What did not change was his faith in eating, which I never understood. An eating man, like a mindless hog, could easily be humiliated and butchered. We were all pieces of meat on other people's cutting boards.

It was not until I was in the Army that my grandfather's wisdom became clear. In 1991, I was eighteen and about to enter Peking University, one of the centers of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square, two years earlier. After the bloodshed of June, 1989, the government had decided, as a precaution, to send all the university's entering students to the Army for

a year of disciplining and “political reëducation,” as it was called.

Our camp was in a small city in central China. The average temperature in the winter was between thirty-five and forty-five degrees Fahrenheit; according to government policy, the weather was warm enough for heating not to be required. That winter, after a three-day blizzard, the pipes froze, and we were each given one basin of water to last until they thawed. Every morning, we had to break the ice before we could wash our faces. We had thin gruel for breakfast, and radish stew for lunch and supper. We lived in hunger, and despair.

On New Year’s Eve, the nine girls in my squad, frostbitten, starved, and shivering, had a spiritual banquet. Taking turns, we talked about the best food we had ever eaten. Without giving it much thought, I offered my grandfather’s lard-and-soy-sauce soup. Unlike the extravagant dishes that my squadmates described, mine was the only one that seemed possible in the camp. If we could sneak into the kitchen, start a small fire, boil a pot of water, and add spoonfuls of lard and soy sauce, we would have the soup.

We dreamed on until lights-out. None of us dared to get between the icy sheets. I realized that only someone who had known hunger and coldness could have invented the lard-and-soy-sauce soup, and, for the first time, I recalled with fondness the days when my grandfather had carefully cut expensive gourmet pickles into small pieces with a silver knife, unaware that I was hiding beneath the table, watching him.

In the darkness, one of the girls opened a bag of powdered milk. We circulated the bag and swallowed. The powder chafed our throats; the extreme sweetness

became bitterness. I vowed that I would never again eat powdered milk, but I could not refuse the bag when it was handed to me the second time. What we ate was at other people's mercy, but in choosing whether to eat or not to eat we were at the mercy of ourselves.



## MAZIE

by Joseph Mitchell

(excerpts)

from *The New Yorker*, December 14, 1940

*Read the annotated  
version!*

A BOSSY, YELLOW-HAIRED BLONDE named Mazie P. Gordon is a celebrity on the Bowery. In the nickel-a-drink saloons and in the all-night restaurants which specialize in pig snouts and cabbage at a dime a platter, she is known by her first name. She makes a round of these establishments practically every night, and drunken bums sometimes come up behind her, slap her on the back, and call her sweetheart. This never annoys her. She has a wry but genuine fondness for bums and is undoubtedly acquainted with more of them than any other person in the city. Each day she gives them between five and fifteen dollars in small change, which is a lot of money on the Bowery. "In my time I been as free with my dimes as old John D. himself," she says. Mazie has presided for twenty-one years over the ticket cage of the Venice Theatre, at 209 Park Row, a few doors west of Chatham Square, where the Bowery begins.

The Venice is a small, seedy moving-picture theatre, which opens at 8 A.M. and closes at midnight. It is a dime house. For this sum a customer sees two features, a newsreel, a cartoon, a short, and a serial episode. The Venice is not a "scratch house." In fact, it is highly esteemed by its customers, because its seats get a

scrubbing at least once a week. Mazie brags that it is as sanitary as the Paramount. "Nobody ever got loused up in the Venice," she says. On the Bowery, cheap movies rank just below cheap alcohol as an escape, and most bums are movie fans. In the clientele of the Venice they are numerous. The Venice is also frequented by people from the tenement neighborhoods in the vicinity of Chatham Square, such as Chinatown, the Little Italy on lower Mulberry Street, and the Spanish section on Cherry Street. Two-thirds of its customers are males. Children and most women sit in a reserved section under the eyes of a matron. Once, in an elegant mood, Mazie boasted that she never admits intoxicated persons. "When do you consider a person intoxicated?" she was asked. Mazie snickered. "When he has to get down on all fours and crawl," she said. In any case, there are drunks in practically every Venice audience. When the liquor in them dies down they become fretful and mumble to themselves, and during romantic pictures they make loud, crazy, derogatory remarks to the actors on the screen, but by and large they are not as troublesome as a class of bums Mazie calls "the stiffs." These are the most listless of bums. They are blank-eyed and slow-moving, and they have no strong desire for anything but sleep. Some are able to doze while leaning against a wall, even in freezing weather. Many stiffs habitually go into the Venice early in the day and slumber in their seats until they are driven out at midnight. "Some days I don't know which this is, a movie-pitcher theatre or a flophouse," Mazie once remarked. "Other day I told the manager pitchers with shooting in them are bad for business. They wake up the customers."

Most Bowery movie houses employ bouncers. At the Venice, Mazie is the bouncer. She tells intimates that she feels fighting is unladylike but that she considers it her duty to throw at least one customer out of the theatre every day. "If I didn't put my foot down, the customers would take the place," she says. "I don't get any fun out of fighting. I always lose my temper. When I start swinging, I taste blood, and I can't stop. Sometimes I get beside myself. Also, a lot of the bums are so weak they don't fight back, and that makes me feel like a heel." Mazie is small, but she is wiry and fearless, and she has a frightening voice. Her ticket cage is in the shadow of the tracks of the City Hall spur of the Third Avenue elevated line, and two decades of talking above the screeching of the trains have left her with a rasping bass, with which she can dominate men twice her size. Now and then, in the Venice, a stiff throws his head back and begins to snore so blatantly that he can be heard all over the place, especially during tense moments in the picture. When this happens, or when one of the drunks gets into a bellowing mood, the women and children in the reserved section stamp on the floor and chant, "Mazie! Mazie! We want Mazie!" The instant this chant goes up, the matron hastens out to the lobby and raps on the side window of Mazie's cage. Mazie locks the cash drawer, grabs a bludgeon she keeps around, made of a couple of copies of *True Romances* rolled up tightly and held together by rubber bands, and strides into the theatre. As she goes down the aisle, peering this way and that, women and children jump to their feet, point fingers in the direction of the offender, and cry, "There he is, Mazie! There he is!" Mazie gives the man a resounding whack on the head with her bludgeon and keeps on whacking him until he seems willing to

behave. Between blows, she threatens him with worse punishment. Her threats are fierce and not altogether coherent. "Outa here on a stretcher!" she yells. "Knock your eyeballs out! Big baboon! Every tooth in your head! Bone in your body!" The women and children enjoy this, particularly if Mazie gets the wrong man, as she sometimes does. In action, Mazie is an alarming sight. Her face becomes flushed, her hair flies every which way, and her slip begins to show. If a man defends himself or is otherwise contrary, she harries him out of his seat and drives him from the theatre. As he scampers up the aisle, with Mazie right behind him, whacking away, the women and children applaud.

Mazie's animosity toward a stiff or a drunk usually lasts until she has driven him out to the sidewalk. Then, almost invariably, she becomes contrite and apologetic. "Look, buddy, I'm sorry," she said one afternoon recently to a drunk she had chased out because he had been screaming "Sissy! Sissy!" at George Raft during the showing of a prison picture called "Each Dawn I Die." "If you didn't see the whole show," she continued, "you can go back in." "Hell, Mazie," said the drunk, "I seen it three times." "Here, then," she said, handing him a dime. "Go get yourself a drink." Although the drunk's ears were still red from Mazie's blows, he grinned. "You got a heart of gold, Mazie," he said. "You my sweetheart." "O.K., buddy," Mazie said, stepping back into the cage. "You quit acting like a god-damn jackass and I'll be your sweetheart."

The Venice is a family enterprise. It is owned by Mazie and two sisters—Rosie, the widow of a horse-race gambler, and Jeanie, an acrobatic dancer. Mazie's sisters let her run things to suit herself. She is profoundly uninterested in moving pictures and is seldom able to sit

through one. "They make me sick," she says. Consequently, she employs a manager and leaves the selection and ordering of films entirely up to him. For a theatre of its class, the Venice is prosperous, and Mazie could afford to hire a ticket girl and take things easy, but she enjoys the job and will not relinquish it, as her sisters often urge her to do. From her cage she has a good view of Chatham Square, which is the favorite promenade of Bowery drunks and eccentrics. "The things I see, by God, you wouldn't believe it," she says proudly. When she catches sight of a person she knows among the passers-by, she sticks her face up to the round hole in the front window of her cage and shouts a greeting. Sometimes she discusses exceedingly personal matters with people out on the sidewalk. "Hey there, Squatty," she yelled one afternoon to a dreamy-eyed little man, "I thought you was in Bellevue." "I was, Mazie," the man said. "They turned me loose yesterday." "Where'd they put you this time—the drunk ward or the nut ward?" "I was in with the drunks this time." "How'd they treat you?" "They didn't do me no harm, I guess." "You get drunk last night, Squatty?" "Sure did." "Guess you had to celebrate." "Sure did." "Well, take care yourself, Squatty." "Thanks, Mazie. You do the same."

Sitting majestically in her cage like a raffish queen, Mazie is one of the few pleasant sights of the Bowery. She is a short, bosomy woman in her middle forties. Some people believe she has a blurry resemblance to Mae West. Her hair is the color of sulphur. Her face is dead white, and she wears a smudge of rouge the size of a silver dollar on each cheek. Her eyes are sleepy and droopy-lidded. On duty, she often wears a green celluloid eyeshade. She almost always has a cigarette hanging from a corner of

her mouth, and this makes her look haughty. Like a movie croupier, she can smoke a cigarette down to the end and not take it from her mouth once, even while talking. She has a deep cigarette cough; she smokes three and a half packs a day and says tobacco is murdering her. On her right hand she wears four diamond rings. She likes vigorous colors, and her dresses are spectacular; they come from shops on Division Street. The glass-topped Bowery and Chinatown rubberneck wagons often park in front of the Venice, and now and then a band of sightseers stand on the sidewalk and stare at Mazie. She despises sightseers and says they give the Bowery a black eye. Sometimes she thumbs her nose at them. Actually, however, she does not mind being stared at. "People walk past here just to give me the eye," she once said. "I got a public of my own, just like a god-damn movie-pitcher star."

Mazie is a talkative woman, and on most subjects she is remarkably frank, but she rarely says anything about her private life, and some people on the Bowery consider her a mystery woman. A man who had been stopping by to chat with her several times a week for years suddenly realized recently that he did not know whether she was Miss or Mrs. Gordon. "You ever been married, Mazie?" he asked. "That's for me to know, you to find out," she said sharply. A moment later she added, "I'll ask you this. Do I look and act like a girl that never had a date?" People around Chatham Square believe, among other things, that she was a belly dancer in the Hurtig & Seamon burlesque houses when she was a young woman, which isn't true. They claim, with not much relevance, that she gives her spare money to bums because she was once disappointed in a love affair. Furthermore, they believe

she was born in Chinatown. Actually, she is a native of Boston, a fact which gives her a lot of satisfaction. Every winter she takes a week off and spends it in Boston, just walking around. She believes the people of Boston are superior to the people elsewhere. One night a blind-drunk bum stumbled into an "L" pillar in front of the Venice, skinning his nose, and she rushed out and dragged him into her lobby. Then she went into a nearby saloon and yelled, "Gimme some hot water and a clean rag!" "You want to take a bath, Mazie?" asked the bartender. This remark enraged her. "Don't you talk like that to me, you yellow-bellied jerk," she said. "I come from Boston, and I'm a lady."

[...]

Mazie's hours would kill most women. She works seven days a week, seldom taking a day off, and is usually on duty from 9:30 A.M. until 11 P.M. Her cage is not much more spacious than a telephone booth, but she long ago learned how to make herself comfortable in it. She sits on two thick pillows in a swivel chair and wears bedroom slippers. In summer she keeps an electric fan, aimed upward, on the floor, replacing it in winter with an electric heater. When the weather is especially cold she brings her dog, Fluffy, an old, wheezy Pomeranian bitch, to the theatre. She lets Fluffy sleep in her lap, and this keeps both of them warm. Mazie makes change as automatically as she breathes, and she finds time for many domestic chores while on duty. She mends clothes, puts red polish on her fingernails, reads a little, and occasionally spends half an hour or so cleaning her diamonds with a scrap of chamois skin. On rainy days she

sends out for her meals, eating them right in the cage. She uses the marble change counter for a table. Once, hunched over a plate of roast-beef hash, she looked up and said to a visitor, "I do light housekeeping in here." When she gets thirsty she sends an usher across the street to the King Kong Bar & Grill for a cardboard container of beer. She used to keep a bottle of Canadian whiskey, which she calls "smoke," hidden in her cash drawer, but since an appendix operation in 1939 she has limited herself to celery tonic and beer.

There are two cluttered shelves on one wall of her cage. On the bottom shelf are a glass jar of "jawbreakers," a kind of hard candy which she passes out to children, a clamshell that serves as an ashtray, a hind leg of a rabbit, a stack of paper towels, and a box of soap. When a bum with an exceptionally grimy face steps up to buy a ticket, Mazie places a couple of paper towels and a cake of soap before him and says, "Look, buddy, I'll make a bargain with you. If you'll take this and go in the gents' room and wash your face, I'll let you in free." Few bums are offended by this offer; most of them accept willingly. Occasionally she gives one fifteen cents and sends him to a barber college on Chatham Square for a shave and a haircut. If she is in a good humor, Mazie will admit a bum free without much argument. However, she says she can tell a bum by the look in his eyes, and ordinary citizens who have heard of her generosity and try to get passed in outrage her. "If you haven't got any money," she tells such people, "go steal a watch."

[...]

Mazie does not spend much time at home, so she encourages people to visit her while she is working. Her visitors stand around in the lobby at the rear door of her cage. She frequently gets so interested in a caller that she swings completely around in her swivel chair and presents her back to customers, who have to shout and rap on the window before she will turn and sell them tickets. In the morning, practically all of her visitors are bums with hangovers who come to her, scratching themselves and twitching, and ask for money with which to get their first drinks of the day. She passes out dimes regularly to about twenty-five of these men. Because of this, she is disliked by many of the hard-shell evangelists who hold hymn-singings in the gutters of the Bowery every evening. One of them, a grim, elderly woman, came to the cage not long ago and shook a finger at Mazie. "We sacrifice our nights to come down here and encourage these unfortunates to turn over a new leaf," she said. "Then you give them money and they begin using intoxicants all over again." When Mazie is faced with such a situation, she makes irrelevant or vulgar remarks until the complainant leaves. On this occasion she leaned forward and said, "Par'n me, Madam, but it sounds like your guts are growling. What you need is a beer."

[...]

Mazie closes her cage shortly after 11 P.M., when the final show is under way, and goes to an all-night diner near Brooklyn Bridge, where she glances through the *Daily News* while having a couple of cups of coffee and a honey bun. The only things in the *News* that she regularly reads from beginning to end are the comics, the "Voice of

the People,” and “The Inquiring Fotographer.” She says she doesn’t read political or war stories because she can’t understand them and because they make her blue. “The world is all bitched up,” she once said. “Always was, always will be.” “Do you really believe that?” she was asked. “No,” she said, after a moment of deliberation, “I guess I don’t.” She spends half an hour in the diner. Then, practically every night, before going home to bed, she makes a Samaritan tour of the Bowery and its environs. She carries an umbrella and a large handbag, which contains a flashlight, a number of cakes of soap of the size found in hotel bathrooms, and a supply of nickels, dimes, and quarters.

If it is a cold night, she goes first to an alley near the steps leading to the footwalk of Manhattan Bridge. Bums like to keep fires going in discarded oil drums in this alley. She distributes some change. Then she inspects Columbus Park, a block west of Chatham Square, where every winter a few bums pass out on benches and die of exposure. The police say Mazie has rescued scores of men in this park. Then, passing through Chinatown, she returns to the Bowery and heads uptown, pausing whenever she recognizes a bum and giving him enough money for a meal, a drink, or a flop. Frequently, in addition to small change, she gives a bum a cake of soap. “*Please use it, buddy,*” she says pleadingly. Here and there she gets out her flashlight and peers into a doorway. She pays particular attention to the drunken or exhausted bums who sleep in doorways, on loading platforms, and on sidewalks. She always tries to arouse them and stake them to flops. In warm weather, if they don’t seem disposed to stir, she leaves them where they are. “A sidewalk is about as nice as a flophouse cot in the

summertime," she says. "You may get up stiff, but you won't get up crummy." In the winter, however, she badgers them until they awaken. She punches them in the ribs with her umbrella and, if necessary, gets down on her knees and slaps their faces. "When a bum is sleeping off his load, you could saw off his leg and he wouldn't notice nothing," she says. Sometimes a bum who has been awakened by Mazie tries to take a poke at her. When this happens, she assumes a spraddle-legged stance, like a fencer, and jabs the air viciously with her umbrella. "Stand back," she cries, "or I'll put your eyes out." If a man is too weak, sodden, or spiritless to get up, Mazie grabs his elbows and heaves him to his feet. Holding him erect, she guides him to the nearest flophouse and pulls and pushes him up the stairs to the lobby. She pays the clerk for the man's lodging (thirty cents is the customary price) and insists on his having at least two blankets. Then, with the help of the clerk or the bouncer, she takes off the man's shoes, unbuttons his collar, loosens his belt, and puts him to bed with his clothes on. This is usually a tumultuous process, and sometimes many of the lodgers are awakened. They stick their heads out of the doors of their cubicles. "It's Mazie!" they shout. "Hello, Mazie!" Now and then an emotional bum will walk out in his underwear and insist on shaking Mazie's hand. "God bless you, Mazie, old girl!" he will cry. Mazie does not approve of such antics. "Go back to bed, you old goat," she says. If she is acquainted with the clerk and trusts him, she leaves some change with him and asks that it be given to the bum when he wakes up. Flophouses are for-men-only establishments, and Mazie is the only female who has ever crossed the threshold of many of them.

At least a couple of times a week, Mazie finds injured men lying in the street. On these occasions she telephones Police Headquarters and asks for an ambulance from Gouverneur or Beekman Street, the hospitals which take care of most Bowery cases. She knows many of the drivers from these hospitals by name and orders them around. Police say she summons more ambulances than any other private citizen in town, and she is proud of this. "I don't over-do it," she says. "Unless a man is all stove-up and bloody, I don't put in a call, but if I had my way, the wagons would be rolling all night long. There's hardly a bum on the Bowery who don't belong in a hospital."

[...]

Most nights, before going home to bed, which is usually around two o'clock, Mazie makes brief stops in several saloons and all-night restaurants. She does not mind the reek of stale beer, greasy cabbage, and disinfectant in them. "After you been around the Bowery a few years, your nose gets all wore out," she says. She goes into these places not to eat or drink but to gossip with bartenders and counter men and to listen to the conversation of drunken bums. She has found that bums do not talk much about sex, sports, politics, or business, the normal saloon topics. She says most of them are far too undernourished to have any interest in sex. They talk, instead, about what big shots they were before they hit the Bowery. Although their stories fascinate her, Mazie is generally cynical. "To hear them tell it," she says, "all the bums on the Bowery were knocking off millions down in Wall Street when they were young, else they were

senators, else they were the general manager of something real big, but, poor fellows, the most of them they wasn't ever nothing but drunks."



## THE MAUI SURFER GIRLS

by Susan Orlean

(excerpt)

from *Outside* magazine, August 2002

The Maui surfer girls love each other's hair. It is awesome hair, long and bleached by the sun, and it falls over their shoulders straight, like water, or in squiggles, like seaweed, or in waves. They are forever playing with it—yanking it up into ponytails, or twisting handfuls and securing them with chopsticks or pencils, or dividing it as carefully as you would divide a pile of coins and then weaving it into tight yellow plaits. Not long ago I was on the beach in Maui watching the surfer girls surf, and when they came out of the water they sat in a row facing the ocean, and each girl took the hair of the girl in front of her and combed it with her fingers and crisscrossed it into braids.

The Maui surfer girls even love the kind of hair that I dreaded when I was their age, 14 or so—they love that wild, knotty, bright hair, as big and stiff as carpet, the most un-straight, un-sleek, un-ordinary hair you could imagine, and they can love it, I suppose, because when you are young and on top of the world you can love anything you want, and just the fact that you love it makes it cool and fabulous. A Maui surfer girl named Gloria Madden has that kind of hair—thick red corkscrews striped orange and silver from the sun, hair that if you weren't beautiful and fearless you'd consider



*Read the annotated  
version!*

an affliction that you would try to iron flat or stuff under a hat.

One afternoon I was driving two of the girls to Blockbuster Video in Kahului. It was the day before a surfing competition, and the girls were going to spend the night at their coach's house up the coast so they'd be ready for the contest at dawn. On contest nights, they fill their time by eating a lot of food and watching hours of surf videos, but on this particular occasion they decided they needed to rent a movie, too, in case they found themselves with 10 or 20 seconds of unoccupied time. On our way to the video store, the girls told me they admired my rental car and said that they thought rental cars totally ripped and that they each wanted to get one. My car, which until then I had sort of hated, suddenly took on a glow. I asked what else they would have if they could have anything in the world. They thought for a moment, and then the girl in the backseat said, "A moped and thousands of new clothes. You know, stuff like thousands of bathing suits and thousands of new board shorts."

"I'd want a Baby-G watch and new flip-flops, and one of those cool sports bras like the one Iris just got," the other said. She was in the front passenger seat, barefoot, sand-caked, twirling her hair into a French knot. It was a half-cloudy day with weird light that made the green Hawaiian hills look black and the ocean look like zinc. It was also, in fact, a school day, but these were the luckiest of all the surfer girls because they are home-schooled so that they can surf any time at all.

The girl making the French knot stopped knotting. "Oh, and also," she said, "I'd really definitely want crazy hair like Gloria's."

The girl in the backseat leaned forward and said, "Yeah, and hair like Gloria's, for sure."

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A lot of the Maui surfer girls live in Hana, the little town at the end of the Hana Highway, a fraying thread of a road that winds from Kahului, Maui's primary city, over a dozen deep gulches and dead-drop waterfalls and around the backside of the Haleakala Crater to the village. Hana is far away and feels even farther. It is only 55 miles from Kahului, but the biggest maniac in the world couldn't make the drive in less than two hours.

There is nothing much to do in Hana except wander through the screw pines and the candlenut trees or go surfing. There is no mall in Hana, no Starbucks, no shoe store, no Hello Kitty store, no movie theater—just trees, bushes, flowers, and gnarly surf that breaks rough at the bottom of the rocky beach. Before women were encouraged to surf, the girls in Hana must have been unbelievably bored. Lucky for these Hana girls, surfing has changed. In the '60s, Joyce Hoffman became one of the first female surf aces, and she was followed by Rell Sunn and Jericho Poppler in the seventies and Frieda Zamba in the '80s and Lisa Andersen in this decade, and thousands of girls and women followed by example. In fact, the surfer girls of this generation have never known a time in their lives when some woman champion wasn't ripping surf.

The Hana girls dominate Maui surfing these days. Theory has it that they grow up riding such mangy waves that they're ready for anything. Also, they are exposed to few distractions and can practically live in the water.

Crazy-haired Gloria is not one of the Hana girls. She grew up near the city, in Haiku, where there were high-school race riots—Samoans beating on Filipinos, Hawaiians beating on Anglos—and the mighty pull of the mall at Kaahumanu Center. By contrast, a Hana girl can have herself an almost pure surf adolescence.

One afternoon I went to Hana to meet Theresa McGregor, one of the best surfers in town. I missed our rendezvous and was despairing because Theresa lived with her mother, two brothers, and sister in a one-room shack with no phone and I couldn't think of how I'd find her. There is one store in Hana, amazingly enough called the General Store, where you can buy milk and barbecue sauce and snack bags of dried cuttlefish; once I realized I'd missed Theresa I went into the store because there was no other place to go. The cashier looked kindly, so I asked whether by any wild chance she knew a surfer girl named Theresa McGregor. I had not yet come to appreciate what a small town Hana really was. "She was just in here a minute ago," the cashier said. "Usually around this time of the day she's on her way to the beach to go surfing." She dialed the McGregors's neighbor—she knew the number by heart—to find out which beach Theresa had gone to. A customer overheard the cashier talking to me, and she came over and added that she'd just seen Theresa down at Ko'ki beach and that Theresa's mom, Angie, was there too, and that some of the other Hana surfer girls would probably be down any minute but they had a History Day project due at the end of the week so they might not be done yet at school.

I went down to Ko'ki. Angie McGregor was indeed there, and she pointed out Theresa bobbing in the swells. There were about a dozen other people in the water, kids

mostly. A few other surfer parents were up on the grass with Angie—fathers with hairy chests and ponytails and saddle-leather sandals, and mothers wearing board shorts and bikini tops, passing around snacks of unpeeled carrots and whole-wheat cookies and sour cream Pringles—and even as they spoke to one another, they had their eyes fixed on the ocean, watching their kids, who seemed like they were a thousand miles away, taking quick rides on the tattered waves.

After a few minutes, Theresa appeared up on dry land. She was a big, broad-shouldered girl, 16 years old, fierce-faced, somewhat feline, and quite beautiful. Water was streaming off of her, out of her shorts, out of her long hair, which was plastered to her shoulders. The water made it look inky, but you could still tell that an inch from her scalp her hair had been stripped of all color by the sun.

In Haiku, where the McGregors lived until four years ago, Theresa had been a superstar soccer player, but Hana was too small to support a soccer league, so after they moved Theresa first devoted herself to becoming something of a juvenile delinquent and then gave that up for surfing. Her first triumph came right away, in 1996, when she won the open women's division at the Maui Hana Mango competition. She was one of the few fortunate amateur surfer girls who had sponsors. She got free boards from Matt Kinoshita, her coach, who owns and designs Kazuma Surfboards; clothes from Honolua Surf Company; board leashes and bags from Da Kine Hawaii; skateboards from Flexdex. Boys who surfed got a lot more for free.

Even a little bit of sponsorship made the difference between surfing and not surfing. As rich a life as it seemed, among the bougainvillea and the green hills and

the passionflowers of Hana, there was hardly any money. In the past few years the Hawaiian economy had sagged terribly, and Hana had never had much of an economy to begin with. Last year, the surfer moms in town held a fund-raiser bake sale to send Theresa and two Hana boys to the national surfing competition in California.

Theresa said she was done surfing for the day. "The waves totally suck now," she said to Angie. "They're just real trash." They talked for a moment and agreed that Theresa should leave in the morning and spend the next day or two with her coach Matt at his house in Haiku, to prepare for the Hawaiian Amateur Surf Association contest that weekend at Ho'okipa Beach near Kahului.

Logistics became the topic. One of the biggest riddles facing a surfer girl, especially a surfer girl in far-removed Hana, is how to get from point A to point B, particularly when carrying a large surfboard. The legal driving age in Hawaii is 15, but the probable car-ownership age, unless you're rich, is much beyond that; also, it seemed that nearly every surfer kid I met in Maui lived in a single-parent, single- or no-car household in which spare drivers and vehicles were rare. I was planning to go back around the volcano anyway to see the contest, so I said I'd take Theresa and another surfer, Lilia Boerner, with me, and someone else would make it from Hana to Haiku with their boards.

That night I met Theresa, Angie, and Lilia and a few of their surfer friends at a take-out shop in town, and then I went to the room I'd rented at Joe's Rooming House. I stayed up late reading about how Christian missionaries had banned surfing when they got to Hawaii in the late 1800s, but how by 1908 general longing for the sport overrode spiritual censure and surfing resumed. I dozed

off with the history book in my lap and the hotel television tuned to a Sprint ad showing a Hawaiian man and his granddaughter running hand-in-hand into the waves.

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The next morning I met Lilia and Theresa at Ko'ki beach at 8:00, after they'd had a short session on the waves. When I arrived they were standing under a monkeypod tree beside a stack of backpacks. Both of them were soaking wet, and I realized then that a surfer is always in one of two conditions: wet or about to be wet. Also, they are almost always dressed in something that can go directly into the water: halter tops, board shorts, bikini tops, jeans.

Lilia was 12 and a squirt, with a sweet, powdery face and round hazel eyes and golden fuzz on her arms and legs. She was younger and much smaller than Theresa, less plainly athletic but very game. Like Theresa, she was home-schooled, so she could surf all the time. So far Lilia was sponsored by a surf shop and by Matt Kinoshita's Kazuma surfboards. She had a twin brother who was also a crafty surfer, but a year ago the two of them came upon their grandfather after he suffered a fatal tractor accident, and the boy hadn't competed since. Their family owned a large and prosperous organic fruit farm in Hana. I once asked Lilia if it was fun to live on a farm. "No," she said abruptly. "Too much fruit."

We took a back road from Hana to Haiku, as if the main road weren't bad enough. The road edged around the back of the volcano, through sere yellow hills. The girls talked about surfing and about one surfer girl's mom,

whom they described as a full bitch, and a surfer's dad, who according to Theresa "was a freak and a half because he took too much acid and he tweaked." I wondered if they had any other hobbies besides surfing. Lilia said she used to study hula.

"Is it fun?" "Not if you have a witch for a teacher, like I did," she said. "Just screaming and yelling at us all the time. I'll never do hula again. Surfing's cooler, anyway." "You're the man, Lilia," Theresa said, tartly. "Hey, how close are we to Grandma's Coffee Shop? I'm starving." Surfers are always starving. They had eaten breakfast before they surfed; it was now only an hour or two later, and they were hungry again. They favor breakfast cereal, teriyaki chicken, french fries, rice, ice cream, candy, and a Hawaiian specialty called Spam Masubi, which is a rice ball topped with a hunk of Spam and seaweed. If they suffered from the typical teenage girl obsession with their weight, they didn't talk about it and they didn't act like it. They were so active that whatever they ate probably melted away.

"We love staying at Matt's," Lilia said, "because he always takes us to Taco Bell." We came around the side of a long hill and stopped at Grandma's. Lilia ordered a garden burger and Theresa had an "I'm Hungry" sandwich with turkey, ham, and avocado. It was 10:30 a.m. As she was eating, Lilia said, "You know, the Olympics are going to have surfing, either in the year 2000 or 2004, for sure." "I'm so on that, dude," Theresa said. "If I can do well in the nationals this year, then ..." She swallowed the last of her sandwich. She told me that eventually she wanted to become an ambulance driver, and I could picture her doing it, riding on dry land the same waves of adrenaline that she rides now.

I spent a lot of time trying to picture where these girls might be in 10 years. Hardly any are likely to make it as pro surfers—even though women have made a place for themselves in pro surfing, the number who really make it is still small, and even though the Hana girls rule Maui surfing, the island's soft-shell waves and easygoing competitions have produced very few world-class surfers in recent years.

It doesn't seem to matter to them. At various cultural moments, surfing has appeared as the embodiment of everything cool and wild and free; this is one of those moments. To be a girl surfer is even cooler, wilder, and more modern than being a guy surfer: Surfing has always been such a male sport that for a man to do it doesn't defy any received ideas; to be a girl surfer is to be all that surfing represents, plus the extra charge of being a girl in a tough guy's domain. To be a surfer girl in a cool place like Hawaii is perhaps the apogee of all that is cool and wild and modern and sexy and defiant. The Hana girls, therefore, exist at that highest point—the point where being brave, tan, capable, and independent, and having a real reason to wear all those surf-inspired clothes that other girls wear for fashion, is what matters completely.

It is, though, just a moment. It must be hard to imagine an ordinary future and something other than a lunar calendar to consider if you've grown up in a small town in Hawaii, surfing all day and night, spending half your time on sand, thinking in terms of point breaks and barrels and roundhouse cutbacks. Or maybe they don't think about it at all. Maybe these girls are still young enough and in love enough with their lives that they have no special foreboding about their futures, no uneasy

presentiment that the kind of life they are leading now might eventually have to end.

[...]

“THE PROVERBS OF HELL”(EXCERPTS)

by William Blake

from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

*As I was walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their Proverbs; thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of Hell show the nature of Infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments.*

1. In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.
2. Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead.
3. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
4. Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.
5. He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.
6. The cut worm forgives the plough.
7. Dip him in the river who loves water.
8. A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.
9. He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star.
10. Eternity is in love with the productions of time.
11. The hours of folly are measur'd by the clock; but of wisdom, no clock can measure.
12. No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.
13. A dead body revenges not injuries.

14. If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.
15. Shame is Pride's cloak.
16. Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion.
17. The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
18. The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
19. The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
20. The nakedness of woman is the work of God.
21. Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps.
22. The fox condemns the trap, not himself.
23. Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth.
24. The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.
25. What is now proved was once only imagin'd.
26. The cistern contains: the fountain overflows.
27. One thought fills immensity.
28. Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base man will avoid you.
29. Everything possible to be believ'd is an image of truth.
30. The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow.
31. The fox provides for himself; but God provides for the lion.
32. As the plough follows words, so God rewards prayers.
33. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.
34. Expect poison from the standing water.
35. You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.
36. Listen to the fool's reproach! it is a kingly title!
37. As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys.
38. To create a little flower is the labour of ages.

39. As the air to a bird or the sea to a fish, so is contempt to the contemptible.
40. The crow wish'd everything was black, the owl that everything was white.
41. Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.
42. Where man is not, nature is barren.



"I REMEMBER" (EXCERPT)

by Joe Brainard

162

I remember "close dancing," with arms dangling straight down.

I remember red rubber coin purses that opened like a pair of lips, with a squeeze.

I remember a boy who could swig down a Coke in one big gulp, followed by a long loud belch.

I remember, just outside the city limits, firecracker booths.

I remember (basketball) total frustration over how to "dribble."

I remember finding it very mysterious that ballet dancers didn't break their toes off, doing what they do that way.

I remember record stores with glass windowed booths you could play records in before you bought them, or didn't.

I remember, in dime stores, "bronze" horses in varying sizes from small to quite large, with keychain-like reins.

I remember, at the circus, kewpie dolls on sticks smothered in feathers, and how quickly their faces got full of dents.

I remember "pick-up sticks," "tiddly-winks," "fifty-two pick-up," and "war."

162

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165

I remember when both arms of your theater seat have elbows on them.

I remember making designs in the dark with a fast-moving lit cigarette.

I remember (spooky) when all of a sudden someone you know very well becomes momentarily a *total stranger*.

I remember (stoned) reaching out for a joint that isn't really being passed to you yet.

I remember (stoned) when the most profound thought in the world totally evaporates before you can find a pencil.

I remember (night) desperate (to say nothing of fruitless) flips through my address book.

I remember how silly it all seems in the morning (again).

I remember getting up at a certain hour every morning to walk down the street to pass a certain boy on his way to work. One morning I finally said hello to him and from then on we always said hello to each other. But that was as far as it went.

I remember taking communion and how hard it was not to smile.

166

I remember smiling at bad news. (I still do sometimes.) I can't help it. It just comes.

I remember that our church believed that when the Bible said wine it really meant grape juice. So at communion we had grape juice. And round paper-thin white wafers that tasted very good. Like paper. Once I found a whole jar full of them in a filing cabinet in the choir room and I ate a lot. Eating a lot was not as good as eating just one.

I remember the exact moment, during communion, that was the hardest to keep from smiling. It was when you had to stick out your tongue and the minister laid the white wafer on it.

I remember that one way to keep from smiling during communion was to think real hard about something very boring. Like how airplane engines work. Or tree trunks.

I remember movies in school about kids that drink and take drugs and then they have a car wreck and one girl gets killed.

I remember one day in psychology class the teacher asked everyone who had regular bowel movements to raise their hand. I don't remember if I had regular bowel movements or not but I do remember that I raised my hand.

I remember changing my name to Bo Jainard for about one week.

167

I remember not being able to pronounce  
"mirror."

I remember wanting to change my name to  
Jacques Bernard.

I remember when I used to sign my paint-  
ings "By Joe."

I remember a dream of meeting a man made  
out of a very soft yellow cheese and when I went  
to shake his hand I just pulled his whole arm off.



SIMON LEYS ON *Qi*

From "Poetry and Painting: Chinese Classical Aesthetics" in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York Review Books Classics, pp. 329-331).

... At first the concept of *qi* might easily appear rather esoteric and abstruse to Western readers; in fact, it must be emphasised that it is also a concrete, practical and technical notion that can be effectively demonstrated and experienced. Thus, for instance, successful transmission and expression of *qi* can be directly conditioned by technical factors, such as correct handling of the brush, movements of the wrist, angle of contact between the tip of the brush and the paper, and so forth. *Qi* in itself is invisible, but its effects and action are as evident and measurable as, for instance, the effects and action of electrical energy. Like electricity, it is without body or form, and yet its reality is physical: it can be stored or discharged; it pervades, informs and animates all phenomena. Although to fully grasp this concept would require us to refer to Chinese philosophy and cosmoesthetic applications present universal relevance. Once more, the Chinese have analysed more systematically and more deeply a phenomenon of which Western painters did not remain unaware: a painting must be invested with an inner cohesion that underlies forms and innervates the intervals between forms. In a mediocre painting, forms are separated by dead intervals and blanks are negative spaces. **But when a painting is charged with *qi*, there are exchanges of current that**

**pass between the forms; their interaction makes the void vibrate.** A painter should aim to turn his painting into a sort of energy field where forms constitute as many poles between which tensions are created; these tensions— invisible, yet active— ensure the unity and vital dynamism of the composition. All these basic notions have been experimented with and explored by Paul Klee, for instance. What is perhaps one of the best descriptions of the role of *qi* was provided by André Masson without any reference to Chinese painting: “A great painting is a painting where intervals are charged with as much energy as the figures which circumscribe them.”

It is in the art of painting that the concept of *qi* found some of its most obvious applications; yet in literature it plays a role that is no less important. Han Yu (768– 824) described its operation with a striking image: “*Qi* is like water, and words are like objects floating on the water. When the water reaches a sufficient level, the objects, small and big, can freely move; such is the relation between *qi* and words. When *qi* is at its fullness, both the amplitude and the sound of the sentences reach a perfect pitch.” **As we can see, the *qi* of literature is essentially the same as the *qi* of painting: in both arts, it is an energy that underlies the work, endowing it with articulation, texture, rhythm and movement.** (Flaubert, labouring on *Madame Bovary*, was precisely seeking to let this invisible yet active current pass through his book, as it was only this inner circulation that could bring breath and life to the words, sentences and paragraphs and make them cohere; as he himself wrote, one must feel in a book “a long energy that runs from beginning to end without slackening.”) . .

**For any artist, whether a painter or a poet, it is thus imperative that he be able first and foremost to grasp and nurture *qi*, and to impart its energy to his own creation. If his works are not vested with this vital inspiration, if they “lack breath,” all the other technical qualities they may present will remain useless. Conversely, if they are possessed of such inner circulation, they may even afford to be technically clumsy; no formal defect can affect their essential quality.** Hence, also, the first task of a critic will be to gauge the intensity of *qi* expressed in any given work of art.