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You see before you, the unfortunate General Tso: notes on eating Chinese, American, and foods in between

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Vassar College

YOU SEE BEFORE YOU, THE UNFORTUNATE GENERAL TSO

Notes on Eating Chinese, American, and Foods in Between

December 16 2015

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Under the Direction of Professor Michael Joyce

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PARIS, AND WHERE WE ARE

It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it... and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied... and it is all one— M. F. K. Fisher, Foreword, “The Gastronomical Me”.

Around 21h20 on November 13, 2015, gunfire was shot at the bar *La Belle Equipe*, 90 Rue de Charonne. I felt as if equally shocked: I knew that street, too well. At 97 Rue de Charonne, 65 feet from the attack, was my favorite Chinese hotpot restaurant at Paris, *Au Ciel*. Nine, a former waiter at the restaurant, told me that he was in immediate contact with his colleagues when he heard about the attack. “They thought someone was playing with firecrackers”, Nine said, “Sounds of explosions were shot nonstop, and gradually some costumers realized that it was gunfire. Then we heard the glass windows exploding from the Japanese restaurant right down the street.” *Sushi Maki*, the restaurant mentioned, was next to *La Belle Equipe* at the corner of Rue de Charonne and Rue Faidherbe. Terrorists came from the west, so they didn’t pass through *Au Ciel*, which was safe on the next block. Customers stayed inside and waited for two hours until they heard police sirens.

Au Ciel was able to reopen the night of November 15, but *Sushi Maki* and *La Belle Equipe* are still closed to this date. Many came to light candles and send prayers the nights after. Posters were attached to trees that stood along streets, and there was one in particular that was planted in between of the two restaurants. Two words were stuck there, *Je pleure*. It was

the tree that separated life from death.

I put in the address of *Au Ciel* into google maps to see once again the streets that I walked on for so many times. I dropped my pin onto Rue de Charonne and was again instantly transferred to the three-dimensional space of Paris. Street views were from this June, the views of what looked like an early morning. The sun was shining from the east. Pharmacies, patisseries, and even cafés were still closed. A garbage truck was coming, one person was waiting at the bus stop, and motorcycles were parked along the street. I felt terribly chilly and lost. Numb, but pricked by thousands of emotions— horror, guilt, happiness, love. I repeatedly clicked forward, forward, passing all the buildings that I had once known, I smelled the streets of Charonne, swirled and too dizzy to make sense of the memories that now only seemed inappropriate to possess. *Au Ciel* was a restaurant that I went with my Parisian host family, after they requested that I take them to eat “authentic Chinese”. It was a place where I took my actual parents, as the Chinese New Year dinner on the first night of their Parisian visit. It was a restaurant that I went with Edith and Angela, new friends, with Michel, reunited after five years, and yes, with you, before and after we were together. 65 feet away, it was *La Belle Equipe*, at the intersection of Rue de Charonne and Rue Faidherbe. I stared at the number 90, and felt like I was, and we all are, survivors of Paris, survivors of sanity, of fragile humanity.

CHOP SUEY IS STIR FRY

Today, there are three times as many as Chinese restaurants in America than McDonald's (Jen)¹. From Panda Express, the prolific restaurant chain that claims to "define American Chinese cuisine" to your around-the-corner² Jade Palace, Phoenix Garden, Red Lotus, Oriental Lantern³, Chinese restaurants are the indispensable parts of the everyday dining and cultural landscape in the United States ("The Tao of Panda"). It has long puzzled me: how did the cuisine manufactured by a survival-struggling immigrant people evolve into the popular taste of sweet nostalgia of its once hostile host country?

The Chinese rushed into the United States as the California Gold Rush took place in the mid nineteenth century. In Chinese, when most foreign city names are translated phonetically, San Francisco still goes by the name *Jiu Jin Shan*, old gold mountain. Chinese immigrants congregated in the Pacific coast, until anti-Chinese violence drove them out of the west in the late nineteenth century and into cohesive bubbles: today, the most potent of the communities is Manhattan's Chinatown (Lee). These Chinatowns are the birthplaces of Chinese American

¹ Also stated by Ku, "Numbering more than forty thousand, Chinese restaurants exceed the total number of – and no doubt deliver more calories than – McDonald's, Burger King, and Wedy's franchises combined" (53).

² "Recent estimates indicate that there is a Chinese restaurant for every ninety-three square miles, or seventy-five hundred people, in the county". *Ibid*, 53.

³ Chinese restaurant names could be generated online, <<http://codefromjames.com/chinafood/?max=2>>. Their names are expected to be exotic and oriental in certain ways, easily recognizable to be Chinese, because "there's no way you'd expect 'The Dorchester' to be serving egg fried rice" (<<http://chineserestaurantnames.com>>). According to this website, top words for Chinese restaurants are China, Dragon, Golden, Noodle, Oriental and Red— surprise, surprise, the most popular word is China.

cuisine.

The history of the development of Manhattan's Chinatown is fascinating. By the 1890s, Manhattan's Chinatown was much segregated from the rest of the city, and guided tours into this outlandish pocket were a favorable pastime activity. The experience was not unlike going to a circus: "if they don't see a few Chinamen disappearing down traps in the pavement pursued by somebody with a hatchet or a long curved knife, they haven't had any fun and go home disappointed" (Sante 295). It was still the age of beef versus rice⁴, but such division risen out of discrimination was slowly disappearing, maybe involuntarily. By 1898, certain restaurants in Chinatown have accumulated considerable wealth grâce à the "bachelor society", where a dozen of single men were crowded in one tenant apartment. These apartments were not at all equipped to make sufficient meals for their tenants, so instead, they frequented restaurants in Chinatown for their gorgeous decorations, clean eating rooms (who knew?), a recess room for after-meal naps and of course, the exoticism of food and food ways that ties all together (Beck 47). At that time, exoticism was still an innocent effect and not a selling point, as Beck insisted; these restaurants were tailored towards Chinese because of the absence of chop suey on their menus.

And yet, it was indeed plates such as chop suey that opened the door to the new era of Chinese dining: by the mid 1920s, Chinatowns were no longer largely seen as the society of

⁴ Senator James G. Blaine famously said, "You can not work a man who must have beef and bread, and would prefer beef, alongside of a man who can live on rice. In all such conflicts, and in such struggles, the result is not to bring up the man who lives on rice to the beef-and-bread standard, but it is to bring down the beef-and-bread man to the rice standard" (Ling 36).

evil heathens, and Chinese food was consumed by all classes, genders, races and religions. The affordability of chop suey and chow mein was so appealing that even the US military was serving them to soldiers in mess halls (Levenstein 122)⁵. It was not the triumph of authentic Chinese culture, but rather, quite ironically, the success of emerging American values: chop suey was one of the cheap foods that tasted good. Technology further spread such victory, as folded paper containers were adopted by Chinese restaurant owners in 1940s and '50s. Advances in freezing and canning also allowed more frequent consumptions of Chinese food, and by the 1950s, "eating Chinese has become a ritualized experience for many Americans" (Miller 449). It has then become a practice so common and predictable that according to interviews done in the mid 1950s by political scientist Harold Issacs and a team of researchers, "the familiar and pleasurable experience of eating Chinese food" have been a consensus among the impressions of China by United States citizens (Hsu). Today, the name of chop suey, like names of many Chinese restaurants, is the most exotic part of the eating experience. In 2009, Coe writes in his book named after the dish, "chop suey was just another name for hash" (195). In 2015, Bittman writes for the *New York Times* to report the most up-to-date definition of the dish, "the current thinking is that 'chop suey' means, effectively, 'stir-fry'."

⁵ "and Chow Mein were staples of the mess hall, joining spaghetti and tamales as the only 'ethnic' dishes listed in the 1942 edition of the US Army Cookbook." *Ibid*, 122.

AUTHENTIC GENERAL TSO

I first learned about General Tso's chicken at the age of 16, when I came to the Wixom, Michigan as an exchange student. Of course before departure, families and friends warned me about "American" food:

–They eat potatoes as substitutes of rice? (And my mom nodded)

–Wait, steamed broccoli, how is it edible?⁶

– they eat a lot of pizza, and cheese.

–Bread.

But most frequently, the question asked was this: Can you have Chinese food there? What do Americans actually eat? And they are questions I can't answer without asking more questions and receiving a very confused look from the other person, as if the original questions were as obvious as, do you drink water.

However many questions I received before departure didn't not prepare me enough for what I experienced in food in America, especially Chinese. I coined the term, "fake Chinese food", that expressed my mild fury at the unrecognizable dish called General Tso's Chicken. As soon as I pronounced the words, my host mother Karen sneered: what do you mean fake? She was confused, and I could not understand where the confusion could possibly have arisen. I had to learn the name of every entry on the menu, probably as Karen did the first

⁶ Broccoli, translated literally in Chinese, is Western kale flower. Despite its ubiquity in Chinese American cuisine, broccoli has never been a well-known vegetable in China. It was first introduced to southern China in the 19th century, but its spread was very limited to the southern/Cantonese cuisine. In 1980s, broccolis are still unknown in Beijing (The Cleaver Quarterly).

time she saw it. I remember the entirety of the maroon gooeyness— nothing I d experienced so far was this gooey, not even glues— that left no chance for the tiny chicken pieces to escape from, and were they chicken?

“So? Is this the food that you have at home?” Karen asked and raised her eyebrows as if she knew the answer.

“No.”

I stared into plate of brown rice, because “real rice” are in bowls and are white, I felt like an entire library could back up my answer. Of course at that time, I did not know that it was as authentic as I could get: no authentic “Chinese” food would include General Tso’s chicken, but what I did not realize was that no General Tso’s chicken was more authentic than the one on my plate. It was as authentic as anything American, including food of all origins: as authentic as burgers, French fries, pizza, hot dogs, apple pie. Mall chicken made it into Lucky Peach’s new recipe book called *101 Easy Asian Recipes*—the name is an intentional joke— “Here’s our goopy take on this motherless dish—a mash-up of all your food-court chickens, be they sweet’n’sour, sesame, or attributed to General Tso” (Meehan 192). What is more American than food-court cuisines, and what food court could do without Chinese?

What I’ve finally come to accept as quintessentially American after five years is instead, culinary ambivalence: “Americans flock to [Chinese restaurants] en masse to consume simultaneously the foreign and familiar alongside a serving of sweet and sour” (Ku 52). It is necessarily repetitive to point out that what I have accepted to be American is, in fact, real

Chinese to most Americans. That is, the familiar of what they are consuming are tastes, “the closest thing to the real thing”, and the foreign are identities (Ku 67)⁷. But for me, coming to terms with this recognition of “Chinese food” as “American” is still uneasy. If only this was not called Chinese, then it would just be another something that I eat and forget for a while. If only I were not Chinese, then I could feel excited, disgusted, or ambivalent guilt-free.

⁷ “What he searched for was not food per se but something that is best expressed through food; he was searching for the one thing tourists typically desire the most, a desire that in many ways defines the very essence of the tourist— a taste of the authentic.” *Ibid*, 67.

CARTILAGE

Tuesday nights at our house are family dinner nights. Tonight it is Jeff's repertoire, pulled pork. After being cooked in the slow cooker on low with a bottle of beer for more than 8 hours, the pork shoulder should barely be able to hold itself together. Resist the smell. Put on clean rubber gloves, and start meddling with the meat. Feel around to pull the bones out: they could be well disguised at this point. Take out extra fat (save it for other recipes), and continue pulling apart tender meat with your fingers. Then, coat the shredded meat generously with barbecue sauce: blend and let it melt. Add a pinch of paprika. Close the lid and run the cooker on high for another 30 minutes. I wonder if Jeff has read David Chang's famous take on pulled pork, which is a more dedicated version of what we try to pull off in our kitchen:

Season 3 or more pounds of boneless pork shoulder with 1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon of salt and the same amount of sugar. Hit it with a couple turns of freshly ground black pepper. Let it sit overnight, covered, in the fridge. Throw the seasoned shoulder in a roasting pan. Cook, uncovered, in a 250 °F oven for 6 hours. After 3 hours, start basting it occasionally with the rendered fat and juices that have accumulated in the pan. After 6 hours, take it out of the oven and let it take a breather on the counter for at least half an hour. Then savage it with two forks, turning it into pulled pork. Use at once or pack it up and put it back in the fridge. This pulled pork is as good in ramen as it is

tossed with some barbecue sauce and stuck between a couple buns, so don't be shy about making a bunch of it (Chang).

– “Do you know that Americans don't eat cartilage?” asks Jeff in gloves, taking out chunks of bones with opaque, curled flexible tissues attached.

– “Really?”, I smiled, having guessed the answer.

– “Growing up, we've always liked it at home.”

Jeff, having moved from Seoul to Long Island at the age of thirteen, tells me how his girlfriend scorns at his attitude towards cartilage. When I grow up, my mom has always told me that your food is the natural remedy to your illness, that is, if you eat cartilage, you will have healthier bones. One of my favorites is her *tong zi gu tang*, translated as pork thigh bone soup:

Take large chunks of raw pork thighbones, chopped up to 4-5 inches, put them in a large pot of cold water and take it to boil. Discard any foamy matters on the top. Next, cut up large pieces of fresh ginger and soak them in: not to intensely flavor the soup, but to counterbalance any taste of raw blood hidden within the bones. Continue boiling for two minutes, then add your choice of supplementary vegetables: corn, lotus root, daikon (winter radish), taro, or kombu. If feeling adventurous or extremely hungry, put in multiple and try out the combo of flavors. Add more water until the solids are entirely submerged, take them to boil one more time and add a tinge of rice vinegar. Turn the heat to low and allow simmer for two hours or more. Taste and season with salt before serving on a winter day.

The most exciting part about this soup, of course, is all about cartilage and marrow. Take a large chunk of bones to your bowl, and take one chopstick to poke into the bone. The cooked marrow absorbs all juices, almost like a meaty jelly— pour them out. Mix with soup or slurp by itself. After making sure that you have found every bits of the hidden treasure, start working on the meat and the cartilage. The meat should be extremely tender, and the cartilage, easy to peel or bite off, is chewy and takes up much flavor from the bones. “It has forces”, the old Chinese would say, which as much as it sounds baffling, would be translated as *al dente*. They are resistant, and conquering them completes a meal⁸.

This is where I find myself, alone on this cold Tuesday evening with a bowl of discarded bones, fat and cartilage under the stove light. They are slightly browned from being in the cooker for so long, and they smell so incredibly meaty. I take off a small piece of cartilage, like a scavenger, a thief, a kid who has done wrong, and put it in my mouth with muted chewing. All the other doors are closed, all my other housemates are in their rooms: it’s only me, in a huge confined space, carefully savoring the closest to what I could get from my mom’s *tong zi gu tang*. I couldn’t believe how silent the room has suddenly become— from the kitchen, I could see street lights being lit and the contrast of colors within and outside of the house. Surrounded by the intense smell, and the pleasure of stealing something that no one else treasures, I look once again at the bowl of squiggly discarded pieces, and reluctantly throw them out.

⁸ Jurafsky explains in *The Language of Food* that in the grammar of Chinese cuisines, soup is the cultural equivalence of dessert.

COMFORT FOOD

Blue shirt, yellow tie, suit pants. Having just thrown out the plastic take-out bag with a bright smiley “Thank You” face, he sits down at the table, fumbling hot Chow Mein with a plastic fork. No dishes need to be done tonight. On the round dining table for one, there lines Heinz ketchup, Sriracha, Frank’s RedHot and some other significant sauce product. Such is the cover of this year’s New Yorker food issue. The artist Ivan Brunetti explains:

I’m always buying gadgets for the kitchen. I got a bread-maker, two different kinds of waffle-makers, a food processor, at least two blenders, a mixing set, a coffee grinder, lots of pots and pans, a nice wok, a huge stockpot, and probably even more stuff, but I seldom cook, and rarely use any of them. It’s partly because my wife and I both work—we’re exhausted at the end of the day—but mainly it’s because I am the one who dreams of a hot and elaborate meal... So, most of the time, we end up ordering or going out. (Kaneko)

One person, one take-out, two chairs. Three types of knives, four condiments, six stickers on the fridge, eight spices in the cabinet. All against one city landscape. If this is the modern foodscape of “eating in timeless time”, “eating in one’s own space-time in micro gravity”, the title of this cover couldn’t have summarized better: comfort food (Horwitz).

Merriam-Webster defines it as “food that is satisfying because it is prepared in a simple or traditional way and reminds you of home, family, friends” (“Comfort Food”). But we all know that “comfort food” is just another name for stuffing yourself with sweet carbs. When

we are sad, our minds immediately recall such foods, as if we are “self-medicating with these dishes” (Jampolis). But does the term comfort food ever sound awkward to you? “[T]he assignment of the word ‘comfort’ to these foods implies that there is a relationship between ‘comfort’ and ‘food’ that may not exist”: a truthful insight from Kelly Brownell, an obesity researcher at Duke University (Hoffman). What is exactly comforting in these foods? The steam from chicken soup that powders your face? The “ummmhmm” that you know you’ll say after a bite of the chocolate bar? The self-abandoning lick of salty particles on your fingertips from a bag of chips? Seeing how your mac sticks to its cheese?

Gabriel, associate professor of psychology at the State University of New York, Buffalo, compares eating comfort food to drinking water:

We tend to think about the need to belong as a fundamental human need. And by doing that, we’re equating it to other fundamental human needs, like the need for food or water... When it’s not fulfilled, you’re driven to fulfill it, in the same way that when you’re hungry, you’re driven towards food. So when you feel lonely or you feel rejected, you’re psychologically driven towards finding a way to belong. (Romm)

Then the article goes on, “Sometimes it’s not food. Sometimes it is.” If comfort food is comforting because it gives us the sense of belonging, because it walks us out of our loneliness, then shall we call songs that we dance to in the shower comfort songs? TV shows that we watch with mama comfort shows? Frat parties comfort parties? If not, then what is it

that captures the essence of the way we eat that brings us solace?

A dip of madeleine brings Proust back à la recherche du temps perdu, the bite that made him report “the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory.” A forkful of cabbage strudel doesn’t make Ephron produce such reports, but rather she exclaims, “it was many things, it was all things, it was nothing at all; but mostly, it was cabbage strudel” (Ephron). A bite of rose macaroon at a reception in late night at the Loeb transfers me back to the flickers of sunshine on l’Avenue de l’Opera, almost syrupy like us, hand-in-hand on a Saturday afternoon. A sip of *café au lait* at the Retreat takes me in front of l’Eglise de Trinité, the building that marks my everyday commute, the landmark of my ambitions and the mundaneness of them. A deep breath of the smell of pork shoulder in my quiet kitchen recalls the scene of boisterous festivity in my father’s hometown, when an entire pork thighbone is brought on last to the table, and itself surrounded by twenty dishes of different sizes, colors, and meanings.

It seems important to set up two groups of foods under the category of “comfort”. The first kind of comfort food was, is, and always will be when it’s being consumed. It’s the food that you don’t go to unless you are driven by a force of sourceless urge that’s larger than you. To me, this explains the uncontrollable crave for Chinese American food, the moment that I’m seized by such artificially sweetened nostalgia for the sense of community it brings along— a community that I don’t necessarily belong to— all the while knowing that I have a well-functioning stove in front of me. The second kind of comfort food is what doesn’t exist

to fit in the category of comfort. They are foods that are essentially food memories, just as fresh as any other, but they have stayed in the mind for longer because of the savor they bring. I recall the only time I had Algerian food, and it was the best one in Paris⁹; I was amazed at how fine granules of couscous absorbed liquids from the tagine, and I'd never imagine golden raisins, eaten with couscous, merguez and black radish, would entice my palate like a cha-cha on the tongue. Since then I have had very little exposure to anything Algerian, but every time Sarah makes her repertoire masala at our campus house, I pair my couscous with nectarine-raisin chutney. Not (only) because it is Indian, but because it reminds me of a remarkable experience. It is comforting to know that on this warm December night, the dried veins of raisins that resist every cut of my spoon could take me back to a mid day in June.

Indeed, there is something different that happens here than, to say, the comfort of snuggling in bed and rereading a chapter of your favorite book. Sure, words also bring you back to a memory and a time and a place, but food, and only food, satisfies the most basic sense of the word, filling. Your body feeds off of what the food represents. Try replacing the experience of biting into a deep fried chicken drumstick, mopping off a coat of oil around your lips, and picking up crispy scraps from your lap... And you realize, nothing is ever going to be this tangible, physical, and at the same time, to speak directly to the soul¹⁰.

The experience of eating comfort food leads to the question, why do some parts of us allow

⁹ According to lefigaro.fr, the couscous in Zerda Café is the winner of “Le Teste de Meilleur Couscous” (the Test of the best couscous in Paris) in 2015.

¹⁰ See Serious Eats, “Chewing the Fat” for more on fried chicken.

the whole of ourselves to become emotionally obsessed over things that most parts of us don't really want? A friend lamented on social media— "I know that there is no real chicken in it, should I feel bad that I am comforted by the chicken rice soup from Whole Foods?" And somehow I ask myself, do I feel the same kind of guilt when I still search for the lost traces of intimacy in relationships? She cannot separate the quality of chicken from what chicken rice soup represents on a misty Sunday afternoon, just as I cannot distinguish the intimacy that takes up a span of time from the one that takes up a whole lot of space. But this overdue intimacy is bitter on the tongue, acidic, competitive, heavy, parasitic to regret, like a pumping gush of bad wine, infecting the palates of your tongue and you know you cannot give in. And you spit it out over the sink, knowing that there will be residue of disgust crouching on all sides of your mouth. Your breath carries the shock. You could only hope to fall asleep to cleanse off the burn. You will taste its absence, like you have lost something imperative, like colorless vodka that demands one swallow and no explanation, and then you will no longer be full of raw rage and piercing aversion that find no recipient.

TABLE FOR ONE

Human beings are happiest at table when they are very young, very much in love, or very alone. Group happiness is another thing. Few of us can think with honesty of a time when we were indeed happy at table with more than our own selves or one other. And if we succeed in it, our thinking is dictated no matter how mysteriously by the wind, the wine, and the wish of that particular moment. — M. F. K. Fisher, “An Alphabet for Gourmets”.

In Hermann’s thesis for Vassar in 2008, she touches upon today’s debate on American culinary identity: “Some people today would say that American foods today are more processed, genetically modified, and artificial than anywhere else in the world. Others would describe American food ways as the ability to order Chinese takeout one night, Mexican the next night, and Indian the next” (Hermann 49). In 2014, Ferguson states two criteria for American culinary identity, abundance and informality. “Attitude and style, not food, define culinary America”, she says (“Culinary America” 23). To her, the Nathan’s hot dog speed eating contest is the epitome of such identity, “it marks the 4th of July as surely as fireworks” (“Consuming Country”). There are also some who suggest that ethnic neighborhoods are going away, for example Pat Willard in her book *America Eats!* in 2009. But the boldest claim of all was made by Ferdman in August 2015, with the title of his piece for Washington Post, “the most American thing there is: eating alone”. Nine years ago, nearly 60 percent of Americans ate regularly on their own, according to the American Time Use Survey, and today the number is estimated to be even higher (Ferdman).

In her most recent book *Hungry City*— how food shapes our lives, Carolyn Steel quotes Cassiodorus, a Roman statesman in his letters to the government, “You who control the transportation of food supplies are in charge, so to speak, of the city’s lifeline, of its very throat” (qtd. in Steel 76). If we think about our hunger and our lives, our discourse around what we eat, maybe we could at least be certain that you who control our food are in charge of our emotions, our breaths, even so to speak, our minds. To continue this thought, Hong Kong writer Ye argues,

If in a discussion there’s something left unclear, unthought of, there’s plenty of opportunity to organize, modify, correct and update the thoughts in another discussion; if a meal is not consumed delightfully, maybe we should not only think about what we’d really like to eat, but to ponder the true appetite of the companion across the table. (Ye)

Maybe this explains why sometimes trying to make relationships work won’t make a difference: if he likes it plain and I like it spicy, he insists on meat and I beg for vegetables, if I only eat what he eats, it wouldn’t make any sense, if only we share the same appetite. Does eating alone grant us the autonomy of our minds?

Loneliness, like dead skin, perches on our fingertips. The inaccessibility of needs and the near impossibility of obtaining them is how our brain fools us into the longing of the smell, the taste, the touch of a person or a place. If each emotion is indeed tied to a physical location in our bodies, longing is definitely best felt in stomachs. “You can fool your heart, but you

can't fool your stomach," one would say. It's a journey down from your nose to your heart. How do I embody your smell? Is it the that of smoky steak, assertive and penetrative through my cores? Is it that of creamy mushrooms, of dissolving butter, of ivory coconut milk, of how they can't survive without each other? Should I lick the lime juice off my fingertips, and would the zestiness of reality wake me up from my aching? I taste it, I taste you when I'm now thirteen hours away, my body fatigued, my spirit soaring. I think about Fisher's saying: "the French have perhaps written more than any people but the Chinese know about food as well as love" ("Love in a Dish" 109).

If photography is to portray the world as realistically as we can, when I walk across the dampen meadow, though, I think to myself, how can I portray that tickling feeling of mist on my toes? Using words, using images, using sounds, using smells, using touch, I guess they are all we can do to bring one's reality to another person. But these elements can hardly ever be at the same place, because if they were, it would just be called experience. So when I say, I wish you were there...I guess I really mean it. Every scene, every smell, every second I think of the joy of sharing, I think of you, like air, consumed in every second of my breath. I think of you, and the fact that you are asleep in a moist, tepid autumn night as I am awake, deserted by my dreams, trying to find your colors through the window, a frame of sky, a rooftop, a tree of maple leaves. I try to find your taste, at the tip of my full sensitivity that allures me back home. Then, in this bright, wide world, I'm inevitably alone.

EAT TO KILL

I got to reflect on my personal experiences at West Point Mess Hall after reading Eisenpress's piece with the same name. During the weekend exchange trip when 16 Vassar students stayed in barracks, I was simply starving. Skipping meals and having make-up ones at odd hours seem to be a standard practice on this campus where "work [i]s measured by the task rather than the clock", and food signifies the start or the end of the task (Horwitz 46).

Carlos gave me a tour of the Mess Hall at 14:00. A tapestry with the name "United States Military Academy" led to the entry, as if otherwise we would mistakenly walk into another school's Mess Hall. It was an entry of a feast space and an inauguration hall at the same time: lit by chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and separated into large rooms by what appears to be a façade of a castle, this hall has flags of countries represented in the academy along the walls of all rooms. Long wooden tables, each could sit 12 people are filled neatly into the space. The maroon chairs echo the color of the ceiling, and the grey floor echoes the color of walls and the façade. At the end of each table, there are condiments of every color and texture: bottles of ketchup, mustard, soy sauce, barbecue sauce, mayonnaise, sriracha, olive oil, salt and pepper, among packets of butter and honey. In the most interior room, another tapestry hangs on the wall, depicting the most famous colonels and generals in the world. According to Eisenpress, plebes—first years—serve upperclassmen, whom they address by sir and madam and should not be friends with (68). I try to imagine a typical meal in this room: a plebe serving cheerios to a sir who he sees regularly in communal showers while

Napoleon looks down from the wall. How much food and how many people does it take to prepare food for a feast hall of future leaders in killing that deprive others of food¹¹?

Around dinnertime, we realized that the outdoor barbecue we were planning on joining was nearing an end at 18:30, where cadets have already played beer pong in 40 degrees' weather and competed in chugging whole gallons of milk and cheered when someone threw up. As our guide, Erica (civilians could be arrested on campus if unaccompanied) complained about Mess dinners just like we would about Deece, she soon realized that Mess closed at 19:00. Hungry and cold and obliged to move in a group, we finally found dinner at 20:30 in the basement of a student residential house. "Three scopes of brisket, one scope of mac'n'cheese, get some soda, beer is two bucks at the bar." The guard pointed to the back of the room where a girl in a West Point sweatshirt was serving Heinekens. A plastic fork leans uninvitingly against each of the two cold aluminum trays on the table. The room was half filled with about thirty cadets, some drinking, some playing foosball, all of whom could not care less about ten civilians trashing their party. I later learned that this gathering is what West Point pays for as an alternative to Mess dining, once enough number of cadets sign up for it on a given night. I stood next to a dis-functioning sound system that separated a couch of cadets in uniforms and a couch of Vassar vegetarians eating buns without brisket, and felt like I needed to sit down.

At West Point, where the minimal unit of counting is a company, and not an individual,

¹¹ See Sodergren for more on preparing food for cadets in the Mess.

“table for one” is officially against the rules in the Mess. Sitting with your company at a designated table is required every meal of the four years you are on campus. Here, Xu’s quote would be an understatement, “as eating becomes a social activity, eating alone becomes uncomfortable, if not shameful” (3). I look over the huge empty space that will be filled with the same people at the same table on any given day, and think about my experiences of eating alone. I don’t meditate, or go to the gym, or even pretend that I do yoga, but eating alone is the moment in a day when I could be fully with myself quietly.

Even just something very simple for one, I always prefer fresh ingredients. To accompany rice already warm in the rice cooker, I like making a quick sauté of buttered mushrooms with onions. This is my twist on chef’s gourmet mushrooms, a dish that is essentially the doting relationship between mushrooms, butter and garlic. But there is no fun if one follows a recipe entirely! Take an onion, julienne a half, cry for a bit and save the other half for another lunch. Next, carefully wash off the dirt from half of the box of white mushrooms and dry them¹². I like to leave about half of the stem on (why waste?), and put it stem side down and slice. When done, put a nonstick skillet over medium heat. Coat the bottom with olive oil, and add in onions. Sear for a minute to experience its punchy fragrance, and toss in mushrooms. Now, the trick here is to add a fingernail-size piece of butter at room temperature, and since there’s

¹² I know, you are never supposed to wash mushrooms because they absorb any liquid that they have contact with. While that is true, J. Kenji Lopez-Alt did a series of tests to test this theory, roasting and sautéing mushrooms that have been washed and dried versus those that have been wiped by dry paper towel. The results are very similar. Ones that have been washed only gain about “1 1/2 teaspoons of water per pound, which in turn translates to an extra 15 to 30 seconds of cooking time”, which I assume is less time than having to painstakingly wipe out all dirt with paper towels. See López-Alt, J. Kenji. *The Food Lab* for more.

already oil in the pan, the heat won't burn the butter. To add even more zing to the dish, squeeze in drops of lemon juice. The released aroma mixed with searing mushrooms and onion juices will quickly fill up the entire room and wake up your appetite. Now, after a few stirs, notice if the pan is getting dry. Allow the pan to drink up a few shakes of soy sauce, for color and for taste. Season with salt and pepper, as well as a few pinches of sugar. When the liquids start to bubble, you know that you've once again made yourself proud with a dish prepared and cooked in less than 20 minutes. Ladle it onto hot rice and watch the browned sauce drizzle down the bowl, permeating the ivory color.

When I am eating a hot lunch alone (yes, it has to be hot), and away from social niceties, "in the most intimate of intimate situations" as Morris would say, I don't like to be interrupted by anyone talking or texting (67). Rather, I plug in my headphones and put on the one show that could tie the whole experience together: *Friends*. When I was nine, I memorized the dialogue of the last scene of *Friends* before I knew what show it was. The recording was from a cassette tape that came with an English magazine. It had materials about American culture that was designed for English-learning students to memorize, because that was the best way of learning a language. I then owned the collection of the entire ten seasons burned on ten DVDs for five dollars, bought in a pirate video store next to our house. Since then, pirated episodes of *Friends* have been in my life for at least five years, where season one would be mixed with bits from season five, and Monica sometimes has the voice of Ross. And yet, if such parallel exists, the intimacy I feel when sharing a meal with you could only be

compared to that of what I feel when watching *Friends*. You each would always have something interesting to say. You each can anticipate my reactions just as I could yours. You both represent the unfinished business from my childhood. I've never quite understood what Fanny Howe meant by saying, "I'm a little slice of time in conjunction with a lot of space and indeed not the reverse", while I feel quite the opposite. I feel so many versions of me co-existing, each to their own measures of a clock, so I guess in this sense, I am never quite alone.

NOT WHO THEY ARE, BUT WHO THEY WANT TO BE

In *The Language of Food— A linguist reads the menu*, Dan Jurafsky talks about the multiplicity of the self in advertising. “If you find yourself one fine day saying the same things to a bishop and a trapezist, you are done for”, quotes Jurafsky from David Ogilvy, father of advertising, to illustrate the need to cater the form of speech to different audiences. For example, the same brand of potato chips could use the ideas of tradition and family when dealing with working class consumers, and at the same time, talk about nature and health with the upper class (Jurafsky 115).

At the end of the chapter, Jurafsky briefly mentions the work of two cultural psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Alana Conner. They propose the split of two audiences within oneself: the interdependent self and the independent self. The interdependent self focuses on families, traditions, relationships, whereas the independent focuses on authenticity and uniqueness. But what happens when our two selves come to one source of food?

The key word here is assimilation. When a group of immigrants come to a foreign land, how much of their culture could be assimilated into the ones of the “superior”? Miller quotes Susan Klacik in explaining that the most resistant to change are food ways, because they were formed the earliest. “Regardless of age,” Miller summarizes, “ethnic food ways function as a signifier of group identity, a cohesive bond, and a communicative device” (435). Miller agrees with this claim by looking at Jewish food ways, and in particular “kitchen Judaism” that was trendy during the mid-twentieth century, “an informal secular practice

marked by the embrace of newly ‘Jewish’ foods, both sacramental and otherwise, as an expression of group loyalty and pride” (435). Thus I ask myself, have Chinese Americans successfully celebrated their identity by putting their food ways against mainstream Americans’? Of course, one could see the retaining dichotomy of *fan* and *cai*, literally rice and dishes, that composes the basics of Chinese food ways. “The Chinese like their rice steamed, white, and fluffy, but most of all plain, and few foods are as pure and plain as a bowl of rice, cooked as it is even without salt. Rice stands in complete contrast to the well seasoned vegetable and meat dishes that accompany it”, explains Eatingchina.com (Jack). The oyster pails, also known as Chinese takeout containers, respects such tradition to separate rice from dishes. Of course, deviations from the classic occur in China too. For example, fried rice, aiming to bring the hardened leftover *fan* back to life by stir-frying with the mixture of *cai* (usually leftover too) and more seasoning. Its Cantonese spin-off is cha shao fan, which isn’t an attempt to revitalize leftovers but rather a fresh combo: taking cha shao (known as Chinese BBQ pork) hot from the oven and place on top of rice, so their colors and textures are in full contrast with each other. Their marriage, then, results in pork fried rice in Chinese American, stir-frying cha shao cubes with green beans, technique taken from fried rice, and using brown rice to assimilate the color in cha shao fan.

Yet, are Chinese Americans slowly developing their own food ways? When one sits down in a Chinese restaurant, chopsticks are often provided for natives or those who are utensil-savvy, but more and more restaurants are only offering forks and spoons in take-outs. Brown rice,

rarely ever used in Mainland China as the main starch or an alternative to white rice, is almost an indispensable variation on the menu in Chinese American restaurants. To take it further, the customs of having one's own *fan* and sharing multiple plates of *cai* in traditional Chinese give away to the culture of independent meals, as ordering one's own sufficient *fan-cai* combo.

Food is linked with identity. That is not news. But how does food transform identity? Could you pinpoint a moment where you suddenly felt differently about who you were by what you were eating? I have had a gif playing in my head ever since I stayed in Paris. I am having lunch with my mom in a well lit and extravagantly furnished Parisian restaurant. I hold up the menu in French, carefully reading through the *entrées* and the *plats*, observing people around me from time to time. After explaining all the entries to my mom, I smile elegantly at the young waiter in tuxedo and order my choices in fluent, perfect, native, effortless French. *Je prends un magret du canard, s'il vous plait.* He smiles back at me, maybe even strikes up a short and flirty conversation, and disappears into the warm Parisian sun, leaving the two of us sipping a flute of champagne. It was a hopeful vision, an aspiring dream, and like a nightmare, I could not get it out of my head. When, how, and where could I finally act out this gif in real life? The question that I dared not to ask out loud was, when could I finally *be* French?

“What people eat reflects not just who they are, but who they want to be”, quotes Jurafsky from the food historian Erica J. Peters (115). *Be* is a strong verb. *Be* is not tolerating; it is not

in flux. I could always identify with one culture, or two, but the one thing that I could only be is myself.

BAGUETTE: BATON, WAND, CHOPSTICKS

When I was sick a few weeks ago, I bought frozen dumplings from the oriental market, 10 minutes' drive from campus. I got the pork-leek filling that we always had at home, this time with extra chopped shrimp: thus a combination of a mainland classic and a Cantonese tradition, whole-shrimp dumpling. This makes the perfect lunch for one: seafood, meat, vegetables, starch, all in one chubby piece of dough¹³. Boil some salted water, preferably mixed with chicken stock, and drop in nine dumplings to silence the bubbling liquids. No need to thaw. Make sure to slightly shake the pot (or if diligent enough to grab utensils) so that dumplings won't stick to the pot. If hungry for diversity and portion, add in a packet of egg noodles too and it will be the homemade version of Cantonese wonton noodle soup. Stay on medium heat, and prepare something to be added into the broth: anything, really, the more the richer the base. My favorite combos are: spinach and egg, bok choy and shrimp, or simply, a touch of soy sauce. Add in half a cup of water, cover and wait till it boils again so all the ingredients are properly cooked. Green vegetables should be brightly green at this point. Now, just one more question before I transfer all to a bowl and devour: should I use chopsticks or a fork?

Most people generally don't think of themselves as bi-cultural, but they are— it comes with the territory of spending half of the time at home or with memories, the other half elsewhere. But immigrants do it more. It can be

¹³ For more on ways to cook frozen dumplings, see López-Alt, J. Kenji. "The Best Way".

exhausting— which is why there are those who prefer to stay in Little Italy or Soho, Little Tokyo or Germantown, to eat at the same table or live in the same dorm, where they can relax, and just twirl or slurp the noodles with no thought about whether to ladle or stab them instead. (Bean 357)

I find myself at the exact confusing moment that Bean describes here, the crossroad that rarely witnesses stopping travelers on an everyday basis. As I fished out a pair of stainless steel chopsticks from an entire tray of stainless steel forks, the clacking sounds demanded me, would you stab, or would you twirl? The opening scene in the story *Other People's Mothers* describes the protagonist's mother who "kept mispronouncing Wanda's boyfriend's name and dropping dumplings. Finally, she stabbed a dumpling through the middle with one chopstick and used the other chopstick to saw it in half" (Krouse 33).

Certainly, there is not one distinct cookware in the kitchen that other sets of utensils cannot substitute, but I always make sure that I have chopsticks in the house that are brought all the way from home: but not even a fancier type made out of aged bamboos, if that's what you are thinking, just a store product. In other words, nothing I can't buy here in Target. I keep worrying that they are fake in some ways. I have never learned to stab my food, not to say to cut them. With chopsticks and spoons, one almost forges an intact relationship with the food that one is holding, and not intruding. Barthes has long proposed sociological theories developed by the instruments of eating:

[Chopsticks] are used to point to the food, to pinch it delicately, to divide it

and to transport it to the mouth; but in all these activities they avoid the brutal, predatory crudeness of the knife and fork we have designed for ingestion... The English word “chopstick” attaches the implement to a wholly different semantic field from the French word “baguette”. Because the latter is the word for both a conductor’s baton and a magician’s wand, it suggests the play of a sensibility entirely absent from the aggressively workaday resonances of “chopstick”. (Porter 298)

I ask myself, is it also a tender effect that might in turn be reflected on how the Chinese interact with each other? Surely, respect on the one end, but also *mian zi* on the other, the face that should not be lost, the distance that should be kept from others, the dumpling skin that should not be broken.

TASTE OF HOME

In *Word of Mouth*, Ferguson describes the popularity of the product Spam: “the handy, inexpensive can of processed pork shoulder, gelatin, and lots of salt that hit the market in the 1930s”. As it was cheap, easy to use, and blended well with Asian seasonings such as soy sauce, it has become “a dish of choice for Asian Americans longing for a taste of home”. Ferguson cites the words of a Chinese restaurant owner in New York: when she left for the United States, her mother “carefully packed a can of Spam with her” (*Word of Mouth* 5). Interesting choices of words here: a taste of home. Could one’s taste of home be something that is not from home?

For me, that taste, shamingly¹⁴, is McDonald’s. The taste that probably is how Americans feel about Chinese food: at once familiar and foreign, both nostalgic and unhealthy. I feel too shameful to voice my objections whenever I hear the claim that McDonald’s and KFC taste the same everywhere in the world. They do not.

When we learned that McDonald’s was a western fast food franchise, the concept of which was unforeseen in China, it soon became a fad among us eight-year-olds. But going to McDonald’s was a rare opportunity, our version of what *guo nian* is to our parents: Chinese New Year used to be baba’s annual opportunity to taste lard. To us, this annual opportunity was our birthdays, and if we were lucky enough, our parents would make a reservation at

¹⁴ Cookbook author Andrea Nguyen confessed that McDonald’s has surprisingly good food but no one would like to be seen carrying a McDonald’s bag on the street. “Shame,” she replied, “I don’t know anyone who would feel differently” (*Specter* 56).

McDonald's. There were likely to be a "children's paradise", a play space that resembled an after-school playground, but floored with rubber tiles and featured castles, slides, life size toy cars, and even trampolines. When we arrived, a friendly waitress welcomed us and handed out McDonald's birthday tiaras to signify our status, as we strolled to the semi-private celebration room: kids in the store sneaked envious peeks at us, pulled the corner of their parents' shirts and begged to spend their birthdays here. Then, we ordered Filet-o-Fish, cheeseburgers, lots of fries and McNuggets with sweet and spicy sauce (our favorites). The waitress came in, took our photos, and told us that there will be games and presents waiting for us when we finished. We sat around in the play space, fully concentrated in childish competitions to receive stickers as presents. It was also a social event as much for us as for our parents, as they stayed aside, conversing to each other about school and work. Sometimes grandparents would come, and there would always be someone's nana by the fence of the play space en garde, her face pink and from air conditioning, and her orange sweater cardigan neatly buttoned, and whisper shouts "careful!" to her grandson at large. Personally addressed birthday songs were broadcasted in the store. Ice-cream cakes were on the house. Balloons flying around the rooms had chocolates inside. When everyone around you was a product of one-child policy, this was a real way of feeling special again¹⁵.

I obviously belonged to team McDonald's in its business duel with Colonel Sanders, but just once very rarely, nana would let me buy a piece of Colonel's Original Recipe (faithfully

¹⁵ See Healy for more on McDonald's strategy in China.

translated as Finger-licking Original Chicken in Chinese). I would never forget the juices exuding from the chicken that's been marinated for however many long, and fried till a crispy exterior that makes you go, wow. It never occurred me how ridiculous that piece of memory was, to wow over Colonel's chicken, or to spend birthdays in fast food chains that owned playground facsimiles. In the winter of freshman year, I was sick of another night of Deece stew, so I decided to find the taste of my childhood fast foods. We called a cab, wrapped ourselves in coats and headed out to Main Street. When we entered KFC, we first realized that we no longer knew how to order in this global chain. There was no finger-licking chicken on the menu. Then, I noticed that the atmosphere was totally different: no trampolines, no wary grandma, no birthday songs. Instead, on that cold November night, only a couple of adults were bowing over their huge chicken buckets, featuring Colonel Sanders, the only smiley men in the room. I started to realize the abundance of all shades of brown present on my plate: fries, chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, gravy. I knew I was done by my first bites. I was instantly full. And I knew that I wouldn't want to ever step into the McDonald's down the street, it was never going to be as good.

THE ORIGINAL ABSENCE

Rhapsodizing her mother and grandma's cooking from her childhood, cook show star Nigella Lawson confessed that "if I could choose the last meal I eat on earth: Herbed Beef with Sauce Béarnaise. And afterwards I would have to have my nanny's Pears Belle Helene, which is poached pears with vanilla ice cream and THE most dark luscious chocolate sauce."

While she recognized that she didn't follow the Larousse Gastronomy instructions for making sauce béarnaise, she simply made it "the way my mother did, which tasted amazing" ("Family Food"). Just like Lawson, who recounted her memories of standing on a stool and cutting up butter for mommy, for many, early family memories can't escape the memories of food. Maybe the first time you used the measuring cups was by making *gâteau au yaourt* with your mom. She made you memorize it— 1 cup butter, 2 cups sugar, 3 cups flour, 4 eggs, and your favorite yogurt (anything but original). You held the cup, extended your arm in the flour bag, and pushed so hard into the ivory powder hoping to get a cup-full. The power was yours now: if adults didn't do as you tell them, *they* would end up cleaning up a powdered kitchen. When the cake finally made it into the oven, you dragged your personal wooden stool and installed in front of the oven, where the magical transformation happened, puffing and puffing. In the background, the TV kept running the same linen advertisement, the music of which you hummed to. The hearty orange oven light was your lighthouse guidance.

Maybe that person who taught you to cook was your grandmother, afterall that was how nana got you to beg your mom to take you to their house. She spoiled you with chocolate cookies,

cotton candy, the sweeter the better, and ignored your mom's complaint about letting you eat too much sugar. It wasn't until later that you realized it was always nana who was in the kitchen, and never your grandpa, her steps getting slower, her clothes no longer fitting, and her baggy sweater sometimes had spill stains. Between streams of steam, she stood hunching, and her over-washed red slippers glued to the ceramic tiles.

For me, food memories started with the absence of them. I was never around in the kitchen. In traditional home fengshui, kitchen is the treasury of a house. Kitchen to the house is like blood to the body, like food to surviving. But the kitchen in our house adhered to no commonsense whatsoever. It was the most inexplicable space: no window, nor garbage bin. When mama cooked, she turned on our stove fan to extra fast to allow air circulation, that it muffled any other sound around her. It was a place where you could almost meditate with the sound of cuisines.

When I was in middle school, mama got off work at around 4:30 pm, and would swing by the farmer's market to pick up fresh meat and vegetables before coming back home. Sometimes, if I were back from school early, she would take me with her. The market was usually in a factory-like space with no natural lighting. Parasitic to residential areas, they packed in around fifty stands, each of which had their own light bulb dangling above. There was only one door: when you entered, you had to hop around to avoid muddy water running from all directions or collected in pits, filthy and blending into the asphalt. Mama, of course, elegantly danced in her high heels to choose where she landed. At the back and around the market were

stands that sold fresh meat and fish products. To buy some chicken, for example, first try to stand the smell of twenty healthy birds crowding in less than five square feet. Choose the fullest looking bird, point it to the dealer, and the dealer (not usually man) will slightly open the cage, push the other birds to the side just to catch the right one with bare hands. They will all start crowing, *ggr-rrrh gaaa-*, flopping, *plfff-tatfff*, idly staring into the space, - -. After a gentle stroke, the bird will suddenly stop any movement and rest docile on the electric scale. We then received a locker number. The bird was sent to a side window with professional butchers while we strolled and shopped for vegetables. The rest of the market sold fresh vegetables, among which almost every stand carried bak choy, tomatoes, garlic, and green peppers everyday. Very often, large selections of seasonal green vegetables were available: garlic sprouts (*suan miao*) in the winter, celtuce (*wo sun*) in the spring, bitter melon (*ku gua*) in the summer, moya (*tong hao*) in the fall. Mama did all the negotiations and at the same time listened to my stories from school:

“How much is the spinach—”

“The other stand has it cheaper—”

“So your English exposé was successful—”

“Another cross country test on Thursday— ”

“The cabbage at your stand looks fresher”.

But she was always the one in the kitchen. She was fast, neat, and she knew exactly what she needed to do. First marinate the meat, then boil the water, and in the mean time chop some

veggies. She knew her repertoire, and I knew that dinner was ready when she turned off the stove fan that separated her space from mine. Baba was always swamped with work, more often than not, he had dinner plans with business partners, or was eating leftovers by himself when he got home after nine. Mama would have already showered and been in pajamas, but hearing the microwave muffling, she would have come to the kitchen and talked to baba about his day:

“Your boss is going to Beijing—”

“They want you?—”

“How about Yangbo in the other department—”

Not till a couple years later did I learn that we would have moved to Beijing had he not declined that promotion to the national office. But no, baba argued, they would have known that he didn't belong there because he had a different taste.

CHEERS

Who would have ever thought that I would write about food for my thesis. Two years ago, I handed in a collection of poems for Michael's Translations class, each as a piece of translation on one food back home, from entrée to main course to dessert. A wonderful professor as he was an acute mind reader, Michael immediately directed me to the writings of M. F. K. Fisher, Liz Grain, Allen Weiss, and Nora Ephron. These names were the basis of my food writing experience, and without Michael or them, these pages of reflections would not have been here.

In a piece that I wrote in freshman year, I said, “美食满足的是胃，吃不到那种味道再去做什么我们都觉得肚子不舒服。生活满足的是心，找不到喜爱的事物不论如何都无法给自己交代。这就是一种催人向上力量。”(Food satisfies the stomach, if we don't find the right taste, it feels uncomfortable no matter what we eat. Life satisfies the heart, if we can't do what we love the most, it feels empty no matter what we do. They are the forces that keep us moving.) At that time, I was only beginning to figure out what these words actually meant; four years later, with these pages before me, I hope I have made some progress.

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