Honorable Mention – Informal Essay

Melanie Hunter

A Humble Bowl of Broth and Flour

167ES

A Humble Bowl of Broth and Flour

As we left Beijing, the fog was thick on the ground; the hired car darted in and out of traffic as if secretly engaged in some urgent pursuit, a kind of surreal car chase, a scene from a blockbuster movie. It would not prove to be as terrifying or as risky as taking a cab in Shanghai, but I didn't know that yet; we hadn't made it that far. We were headed out of Beijing on our way to do what every traveler to China really must do, if she is not to risk the scorn and ridicule of everyone back home: we were going to climb *Wanli Changcheng*, the Great Wall.

*****

This was just the sort of thing that, growing up, was an experience far beyond the reach of my imagination. Being raised in rural Oklahoma in a solidly working class family was not, typically, the pathway to grand adventures and world travels, but getting an education was a start. I'd wanted to go to an expensive private university that my parents really couldn't afford, so we tried to strike up a deal: I would keep up my grades and thus maintain some scholarship assistance and also live with my grandmother, close to campus, who would help out with my living expenses. At seventeen, the prospect of living with one's grandparent while attending college—barred from the chaos of dormitory life or the illicit joy of fraternity parties, not to mention the bittersweet pleasures of sleeping through classes—kept me firmly grounded. I was determined to have this education, not any other, which I considered inadequate. State schools were fine, if you had to. So, I agreed.

It took a while, naturally, to settle in. I occupied what used to be my aunt's room, with walls painted a delicate, dusty pink and a built-in vanity topped by an elaborate gold-veined mirror. Her old bulletin board was still up in the room—she'd been out of the house for, what?,

nearly twenty years by the time I moved in, married and divorced and happily remarried with a daughter six years younger than I. But the bulletin board remained, covered with memorabilia, newspaper clippings from her dance performances, pictures of high school friends, a dead and dried rose pinned up in between. I had read that bulletin board countless times over the years, staying with my grandparents at various times throughout my life. But its presence there in the room continued to remind me of how I didn't quite belong, of how it wasn't quite right that this should be my college experience. My grandmother, however, tried—quietly and diligently—to dispel such (as it turned out, misguided) unease. She cooked for me, she cleaned up after me, she washed and dried and folded my laundry carefully. My grandfather had passed away a couple of years before I moved in, so I think she enjoyed having someone in the house, even if I added quite a burden to her chores, something I never noticed at the time. The bulletin board came down, without comment, one afternoon while I was in class. I have no idea what happened to it.

After a couple of years, our routine was solidly established. We took to watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in the evenings, me trying to explain what the various trek-isms meant (dilethium crystals, photon torpedoes, warp engines), her arguing that Riker was handsomer than Picard ("He's bald!," she'd cry). It was my one indulgence, in between the reading and studying and numerous campus activities. She cooked dinner just about every night, trying something new occasionally but usually making her way through a repertory of established dishes, things she'd always made, things I invariably enjoyed. Her meat loaf was stunningly juicy and tender (her secret: to add a can of chicken vegetable soup to the mix, basting the loaf from the inside out). The sandwiches the following evening were as good if not better than the thick slabs with roasted potatoes on the previous. She made the heartiest

vegetable-beef soup I'd ever eaten—slumgullion, she always called it, because anything in the crisper drawer or the pantry was fair game. She made porcupines, little balls of ground beef studded with rice simmered in tomato sauce; we knew when they were done when the grains of rice would swell and stick up all over the meatballs, giving them their prickly appearance. She even tried her hand at stir-fry every once in a while, knowing I liked to eat healthy and would eat any vegetable (except, oddly enough, onions) she put in front of me. There were minute-steaks and thin, crispy pork chops; an occasional brisket or pot roast; big steaming vats of beans and black-eyed peas with ham hocks; and always, always, potatoes—roasted in vinaigrette, slowly smother-fried in butter, mashed, baked, boiled, pancaked. I only eat potatoes rarely these days; I could never match the loving abundance with which my grandmother approached this humble vegetable.

Aside from all this bounty, my gran was famous for two things which came out of her kitchen every holiday season: peanut brittle and chicken-n-dumplings. The former was good, although never my favorite because I lack a genuine sweet tooth. I did enjoy the drama of the brittle, though—gran would watch the weather channel for hours on end, waiting for the humidity to drop just one more percentage point; when it did, she would rush about in the kitchen measuring and pouring as quickly as possible. The peanuts would be boiled in the syrup—the *only* way to make it, according to my grandmother—infusing the entire brittle with the roasted flavor of nuts. At the last moment, she would ask me to add the tablespoon or so of baking powder; the molten mass would puff up and roil as she rapidly stirred it, turning an odd shade of green for a few seconds. We'd pick up the pot—it took two of us, once my gran hit her late sixties—and carefully scrape the candy onto waiting baking sheets. The pans would cool outside on the porch until the slabs of candy were brittle enough to shatter. We'd eat the various

slivers and shards left over from the process of breaking it into generous chunks to give to family and friends. I always liked the candy part best, without the peanuts; airy and caramelized right to the point of scorching, it seemed the product of an amazing alchemy more mysterious than explicable by mere heat.

Still, the chicken-n-dumplings were what I craved as soon as the weather turned cool. I could talk her into making it once, maybe twice, before the holidays, although she always felt it an indulgence to make it just for the two us. But it was an inescapable demand at Christmastime. Had she refused, I imagine there would have been some sort of revolt, but she was always happy to do it, even if she acted put out sometimes. That was the essence of my gran; she'd do just about anything for any of us, but she liked to mouth off about it. It was her right, she figured, to critique our hairstyles or clothes or boyfriends or lack thereof; she'd earned it in the process of caring for us, sacrificing for us. It seems, now, a reasonable enough exchange.

So, she'd boil the chicken on Christmas Eve—insisting on a big, fat hen for her broth, which was the clue to our lasting desire for this treat: we really didn't care a fig for the chicken itself but what we craved were the dumplings swimming in that rich stock. Those hens were invariably tough but flavorful, and fatty all over; the finished broth would sparkle with oblong drops of rendered fat, deep yellow in color—amazing when you knew that gran didn't add a single other thing to her broth but that hefty hen, water, and some table salt. Nary a single vegetable to sully the platonic purity of this ur-broth. The dumplings took the real work. Again, there wasn't much to the ingredients—flour, a dash of salt, and a touch of baking powder, mixed not with milk (blasphemy) but with that beautiful broth. But the process of rolling them out, cutting them, and dropping carefully into the remainder of the boiling stock consumed precious time that could've been used for opening presents (so the kids thought) or eating (so the rest of

us thought). My aunt and uncle invariably provided the necessary lubricant to keep us happy but working steadily towards dinner: cold duck for gran and champagne for the rest of us of a certain age. After two glasses, gran's face would turn a pretty shade of pink; she'd dance a few steps, twirling from the countertop to the stove with raw dumplings in her hand, and a sing a few bars of one of her favorite songs, usually from an old movie. I was her valued assistant, stirring the pot of simmering broth constantly with an old wooden spoon, trying to make room for more dumplings.

It only took about twenty minutes or so for the dumplings to be cooked through, and it took much less than that for the entire pot to be dished up and devoured, along with the myriad other treats on the holiday table—my aunt's mashed potatoes, thick with a whole tub of sour cream and rich with a stick or two of butter; a roast turkey or glazed ham; perhaps some collard greens simmered with salt pork; and, of course, angel biscuits with honey on the side. But if truth be known, it was the dumplings that drew us back year after year, that made us feel at home even after we'd moved out and away. They were unique, square and solid, heavy and chewy, deeply flavored with the essence of that fatty hen; those fluffy dumplings you'd get if you ordered them out somewhere were frivolous puffs, mere shadows of the real thing. Gran's dumplings tasted like nothing else in this world. But they were the simplest of foods, with few ingredients carefully chosen, offerings of fussy love from an expert both in cooking and in caring.

*****

I tried, one year, to make the dumplings, after my gran had passed away. They were okay, pretty good even, but they weren't quite the same. A little too heavily rolled out, a little twang to the broth (I had added some onion and carrot, thinking I was improving on what turned

out to be perfection). Everyone praised them, I remember, but they haven't made their way back onto our holiday table with any regularity. And so, it's been a few years since I've had them, even my poor imitations. Until China.

The day did start out with fog—and a reckless abandonment to what we hoped was the expertise of our driver—but as we made our way outside of Beijing, the sun burned through the mist, glowing with the clean warmth of a sunny day after days of rain and muck. The smog of Beijing was like living in cheesecloth; the explosion of sunshine and clean air was an overdue respite. The driver turned and smiled at us, rolling the windows down and lighting a cigarette. Wave after wave of mountains grew up around us, so impossibly green and prosaically beautiful; the scene spoke of the eternal tranquility one, quite stereotypically, associates with the Asian imagination.

We arrived at the Wall early. Very early. As of yet, no restaurant or souvenir shop was opened; no tour bus arrived; no water vendor out in the slightly chilly June morning. We feared we'd have nothing to do for a couple of hours, but there appeared to be one lone person sitting behind the glassed-in booth that distributed tickets allowing us to climb. We had the Wall to ourselves, quite literally. And, man, was it beautiful: after the architectural expressions of power that make up much of Beijing, these mountains—etched by long-abandoned terraces and worn smooth, if not tame, by millennia of happenstance—expressed a kind of power beyond the puny mortality of the human experience. There was no arrogance in this majesty, no boasting; there merely *was* majesty, the vastness of it inexpressible in any terms other than the thin, winding track of crumbling stone and turrets disappearing into the distance. The Great Wall, with quiet irony, serves to outline the greatness of the natural world, devoid of human interference.

Coming down The Wall we were exhilarated, tired, thirsty, and above all, hungry, as none of us had found the time to eat breakfast before our early morning break from the city. The tiny makeshift town that had grown up among the foothills below this section of The Wall, Badaling, was still slow and sleepy, though a handful of the hordes of tourists were beginning to pull up in their tour buses. We stumbled upon a small restaurant, something vaguely resembling a café or diner, and were its first customers of the day. Our guide, a young American student from Stanford who spoke fluent Mandarin, suggested we try the "shaved" noodles. As it turns out, shaved noodles (in Mandarin, *dao xiao mian*) are a specialty of Shanxi province in the Northern, wheat-producing part of China. These noodles would not be the delicate, often spicy noodles made from rice flour (*fen*) that many Americans associate with Chinese cooking, due to the apparent pervasiveness of Sichuan-style cuisine on our shores; these would be hearty and, like many dishes in Northern Chinese cooking, gentle with spices, warming and welcoming, even in the long, sultry summer.

The shaved noodles arrived, steaming hot and fragrant, and I'll be damned: I was eating a bowl of my grandmother's chicken-n-dumplings in an unassuming restaurant, whose name I'd never discover, at the foot of the Great Wall in China. East meets West in a humble bowl of broth and flour.

*****

It seems as if, like many lessons we truly absorb, this epiphany originated from the gut: the serendipitous collision of memory, culture, and sensory experience. Food is identity, so the current cliché goes. Undoubtedly, but identity is complicated, the product both of an individual's singular experience and the larger generalizations required to make sense of that experience. I wondered if I could be so very different from someone who had grown up eating,

loving, identifying the same wonderful dish; surely we were bound, in some small way, by the shared experience of this particular taste, this distinctive memory. At the same time, we were admittedly separated by the wide gulf of geography and the even wider gap of culture: my middle American upbringing, devoid of history—who knew where my ancestors came from and how they eventually made their way to Oklahoma?—didn't cohere in a cultural milieu where ancestors are revered and family trees proudly recited. But I walked away from that table satiated, well-fed and nostalgic, startled by my potential relationship to a larger world.

As Doris Lessing once put it, "The moment you have a shot of the earth from space . . . then there's a new sensibility; there has to be." It's a sentiment I find particularly apt when talking about a man-made structure actually visible from space. I know my gran must have spied the little dot that was me, climbing and climbing.