Writing Hunger

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I'll begin with a simple assertion: we cannot understand the power and the meaning of food, until we understand hunger. Hunger at its most basic is the lack of food, and therefore a body's need and craving for food.

If we are very lucky in this world, we feel hunger as a minor physical discomfort that can be easily, quickly sated: a sandwich to go, a bag of chips from a vending machine, a cup of soup in the microwave.

Hunger, of course, can also mean a craving for something that food represents or promises but somehow has failed to deliver to us.

The ritual of sitting down to a meal, is this not the theater of community and family? Eating a dish prepared by someone who cares for you and your wellbeing, is this not the tangible representation of love and caring? Then, there's the intake of flavors, vivid and deep, nurtured by the sunlight above and the earth beneath our feet, is this not the epitome of a sense of place and the pleasure of belonging?

It's this latter form of hunger—the hunger of the spirit, more so than the body, though they are, of course, often intertwined—that my novels and essays fixate on.

As a writer, I'm interested in food and eating as performance, ritual, replacement, reward, punishment, pleasure, resistance, and as means of creativity and communication. Simply put, I'm interested in everything but the food itself. If I write about a tree-ripened plum, its purple skin split by the sun, I don't do so in order to make the reader desire the plum itself, but for what that plum represents within the narrative and the text. In life, certainly, I would desire the plum too. In literature, the plum I would hope is a bit more complicated and nuanced than that.

My first novel, *The Book of Salt*, is often described as a novel rich in food. Bình, the first person narrator, is a young, gay, Vietnamese man who works as a live-in cook in the Paris home of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. I invite you to consider the novel in another way: It is a novel that is rich in hunger.

Bình is surrounded by food, the bulk of his waking hours spent in kitchens and markets, yet he is a man in a constant state of deprivation. He hungers for companionship, love, home, for someone to say his true name, and he hungers for verbal language itself. Fluent in neither French nor English, the dominant languages of his current country, France, and of his current employers, respectively, Bình has gone without this "necessity" for so long that he, akin to an emaciated famine victim, is rendered barely visible to those around him.

In Chapter 13 of the novel, Bình has accompanied Stein and Toklas to a country house in

Bilignin, a small farming village in the Rhône Valley. There, Bình seeks companionship and a substitute for language in alcohol. The irony is that the more alcohol he consumes the less his appetite becomes, which literally results in a fading away or depletion of his physical body:

> *[I]n Bilignin as in Paris I have Sundays off. The farmers in the village are gracious enough and at first simply curious enough to invite me, the first Asiatique they have ever seen, into their homes. And their sons, I have to admit, are handsome enough to make me accept each and every time. All the families in this area make their own wine so drinking is never a problem, and generosity fills my glass till I thirst for just a bit of water. I have found that water at the end of these nights eases my entry back into Monday. Though sometimes there is not enough water in the sea for me. I awake the next morning to the sound of Miss Toklas in the kitchen slamming pots and pans. . . .*
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> *Of course, I try not to indulge in this sort of behavior very often, not more than two or three times during the season. It is just that drink is cheaper in Bilignin. In fact, it is free. The farmers there ask very little of me, and when they do they seem to enjoy, unlike their Parisian cousins, the sounds of the French language faltering on my tongue. Sometimes they even ask to hear a bit of Vietnamese. They close their eyes, trusting and sincere, and they imagine the birds of the tropics singing. . . .*
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> *The farmers in Bilignin work and drink like horses. The two activities do not seem to affect each other in any significant way. I, however, begin losing my appetite and my body weight right along with it. By the end of the summer, GertrudeStein, when greeting me, finds it necessary to repeat herself, "Well, hello, Thin Thin Bin."*
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> *A cook who has no desire to eat is a lost soul. Worse, he is a questionable cook. Even when I can no longer take a sip, a bite, a morsel of any of the dishes that I am preparing for my Mesdames, I never forget that tasting is an indispensable part of cooking. The candlelight flicker of flavors, the marriage of bright acidity with savory, aromatics sparked with the suggestion of spice, all these things can change within seconds, and only a vigilant tongue can find that precise moment when there is nothing left to do but eat. For a less experienced cook, such a turn of events would be disastrous. Imagine a portrait painter who attempts to practice his art with his eyes sealed shut. I, of course, am able to maintain the quality of my cooking with the help of my keen memory. My hands are able to recreate their movements from earlier times. My loss in body weight, however, I cannot hide and shows itself as a forlorn expression on my face, one that both my Madame and Madame have yet to notice.*

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In my second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, the first person narrator, Linda Hammerick, has a neurological condition, a form of synesthesia, which causes her to experience a taste when she

hears or speaks most words.

To me, Linda's condition—or her secret sense, as she refers to it—is a vivid example of the differences, seen and unseen, detectable and undetectable, that we believe sets us apart from one another. Linda's condition or rather her learned suppression of her "secret sense" is also a metaphor for her hunger to belong. Like Bình, her world is full and flooded with flavors, but, like so many of us who are deemed "different" and "other," she remains in a constant state of hunger for the elusive sustenance and comfort of belonging.

In Chapter 2 of *Bitter in the Mouth*, Linda reveals the way that she conceives of her condition and the unique way in which food and language are intertwined for her:

> *MY FIRST MEMORY WAS a taste. For most of my life I have carried this fact with me not as a mystery, which it still is, but as a secret. The mystery had two halves. The halves had within them other chambers and cells. There was something bitter in the mouth, and there was the word that triggered it.*
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> *I'll begin on the side of taste:*
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> *It was bitter in the way that greens that were good for us were often bitter. Or in the way that simmering resentment was bitter.*
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> *I have not yet found a corresponding flavor in food or in metaphor. But such a "match," even if identified, would only allow me the illusion of communication and you the illusion of understanding. I could claim, for example, that my first memory was the taste of an unripe banana, and many in the world would nod their heads, familiar with this unpleasantness. But we all haven't tasted the same unripe fruit. In order to feel not so alone in the world, we blur the lines of our subjective memories, and we say to one another, "I know exactly what you mean!"*
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> *The other side of the mystery is the word:*
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> *For me, the few words that didn't bring with them a taste were sanctuaries, a cloister in which I could hear their meanings as clear as my own heart beating. The rest of my vocabulary was populated by an order of monks who had broken their vows of silence and in this act had revealed themselves to me. Not their innermost feelings of sadness or ecstasy. Not the colors that they wore underneath their robes. But what they last placed in their mouths.*

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I am here in Japan to complete the research for my third novel. Through the generosity of a U.S.-Japan Creative Artists Fellowship, I am here to research a novel about Lafcadio Hearn, a half Greek, half Irish writer who lived from 1850-1904. Born on the Ionian Island of Lefkada, Hearn grew up in Ireland, studied in France and England, immigrated to the U.S. as a young man, and eventually immigrated once more to Japan in 1890. When he passed away in Tokyo, he was known as Koizumi Yakumo.

The novel will be told in the voice of four significant women in his life: Rosa, his Ionian Islander mother; Alethea, his African American wife; Elizabeth, a white American journalist, editor, and his longtime friend and first biographer; and Setsu, his Japanese wife, the mother to his four children, and his unsung literary collaborator. Roger Pulvers, a writer and literary scholar based in Australia, who has written often about Hearn, characterizes him as a master “re-teller” of stories. I would modify this to say that Hearn is a master listener, as it was often Setsu who would tell him ghost stories over and over again until he was finally satisfied that he had truly *heard* them.

The novel's working title is *The Sweetest Fruits*. I thought it would be appropriate to end my remarks with the first few lines from the novel-in-progress. The following is in the voice of Hearn's mother:

> *Patricio Lafcadio Hearn was born hungry. I could tell by the way that he suckled. From the first time that his mouth found the nipple, he was not want to let it go, his eyes opened and unblinking, watching and daring me to tug myself from him.*
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> *All babies are born with an empty stomach, but not all of them are born with such need in their eyes.*