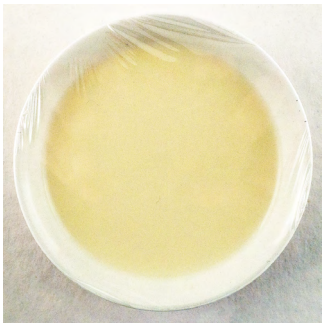


Morsels

Samuel Herzog



PRE-TEXT

Everyday an enormous amount and variety of vegetables, spices, cereals, meat, fruit, and fish pass through our hands and across our palates. What interests us most is whether we like their taste, how they can be cooked, and how they affect our health. What they cost, and how they can influence our social standing is perhaps also of importance. It could well be that we have a particularly loving relationship with this or that piece of food that passes between our lips, something that generally speaking has much to do with our associating it with memories of our childhood or vacations, love affairs, and victories. Even we are constantly surrounded by these ‘morsels’, we mostly have very little to say to them – and if we have to describe the many forms of delight they give us, we always end up saying more or less the same thing.

All of this perhaps also has something to do with the fact that nowadays there is an abundance of food in the Global North. We no longer have to endure hunger. Language, however, occasionally serves to replace something, to make something otherwise missing, that we long for, present through words. When we are hungry, our imagination comes up with representatives: Sentences one can chew and phrases from which the meat juices spray. In plentiful times we can save ourselves effort such as these. But are we also not lacking something if we simply take all this food for granted?

Since 2013 Samuel Herzog has been working on a series of articles, in which some of these ‘morsels’ are elevated to the role of protagonist for a moment and taken seriously in a concentrated way. It is do with deceleration and viewing individual pieces of food in a manner that is as amateurish as it is narrow-minded. And it is also about trying out a new form of reflection on and writing about these ‘morsels’. The articles are written on the back of, to some extent ritualized concentration on the particular object for a limited period of time – and it goes almost without saying that where possible they are begun when the author has a certain feeling of hunger in his belly.

HEAD OF A PIG

As an amateur cook you sometimes just reach your limits and are really put to the test by the food you want to prepare and taste – in particular of course if it is your first time. That was the case with my first (uncleaned) lamb tripe which, turning up his nose, the Turkish butcher handed over the counter to me in a small plastic bag. My first black salsify party had existential traits as well – me thinking after preparing several kilos that as fate would have it the world would start sticking together in my kitchen. My first whole shark also presented a problem in that the next generation gushed from its stomach on to my kitchen table – three baby sharks the length of a pencil, which looked as if they were praying. I could also tell

you a few stories about durian fruit, or the fermented fish I tried to clean in a Norwegian lake ...

To date, however, the biggest test of my culinary belief in the good was my first whole pig's head. I had explicitly ordered "as small a head as possible" from the butcher, as it is always best to start off modestly with new dishes. When I noticed that the sales assistant did not have the strength to hand it to me over the counter, I began to have misgivings. A gloating smile on his lips, the packet he finally managed to push towards me over the floor of the butcher's, weighed almost ten kilograms. I had some difficulty securing it on my bicycle's luggage rack and cycled extremely carefully, having no wish whatever to see it sliding across the road in a bend.

At home I freed the head from the blue plastic and heaved it on to the kitchen counter. There was something strangely natural about the way it lay there, pointing its snout up and allowing its ears to hang in the sink. Its eyes had already been cut out in the abattoir. I felt as if there were a speech bubble hovering over its skull with the terse sentence: "I am dead!" A pig's head like this is not a butchery masterpiece, as no bones are removed, and nothing is saved. All you do is take a sow and saw through it behind the ears – job done.

I initially planned to immerse the head in salt brine for a few hours – to get rid of the snot from its nose (or to rid myself of the idea that its snout just had to be full of mucus). Because I did not have a pan big enough, I hauled the animal to the shower, where I put it in a garbage bag and poured salt and water in, thus giving it a modest bath.

I actually intended braising the head on a bed of root vegetables in the oven for several hours. But that way the tray would not fit in the oven, so I removed the vegetables and slid the large, imposing piece in on its own, it to my mind looking somewhat undignified. I left the kitchen to fetch a few bottles of red wine from the cellar. When I returned I was hit by the smell of burnt flesh and the kitchen was full of black smoke. I threw open the window, then the oven door. The heat had caused the head to swell, and the snout had got wedged in the upper heating coil. In order to be able to get the tray out of the oven again I had to cut the animal's nose off and then scrape it off the oven with a spatula.

I thought it was all going to be festive and nice: a whole pig's head, braise for hours, repeatedly basted with wine and fat, bright golden on a bed of carrots and parsnips. The reality was far removed from this ideal. I had invited all my friends to this "pig's head" – and was now glad that an unusually high number of them had sent their apologies. There were ultimately three of us sitting over the severely mutilated and slightly charred head – what an undignified end, what a sorry sight.

There is no other way to put it – my very first pig's head was a culinary disaster. It was more than a year before I dared tackle this part of the animal again – and this time a different butcher actually sold me a small head weighing just 1.7 kilos that also fitted in my pan. I gave it all my attention for an entire evening, turning it into a 1.3 kilo terrine that I was so proud of I would have liked nothing better than to parade through town like a

trophy. So reaching your culinary limits does serve a purpose after all – even if it is only to give a pig’s head a dignified send-off.

CHARD

I hate chard – and this has always been the case. Even under the pretty name of silverbeet it conjures up the most disgusting of thoughts in me – the color of its stem is reason enough to leave it well alone. When Caravaggio created his ‘Entombment of Christ’ in 1603 he chose chard-white – a color that is entirely discarnate for being so bright, yet still somehow greenish-grey – for the savior’s deadest parts, thereby leaving no doubt about the complete lifelessness of the depicted body. Maybe he even picked the color of chard to allude to the fact that he essentially did not really believe in the Resurrection at all. Recently, chard with red and yellow stems has increasingly been the flavor of the week; but this does nothing to change the dread this vegetable is able to induce – this colorful display is mere window-dressing, for in all truth, all chard is pallid and death-like.

As a child I ate basically everything and a lot of everything – which did somewhat worry my parents; for example when I, and this was long before the onset of puberty, was dead-set on ordering a second andouillette at a French country inn. My younger brother was my polar opposite in this respect – the list of things he would not eat was so long that at times he himself lost track. He was particularly averse to vegetables and specifically to spinach. This likewise distressed my parents, who tried to persuade him to ingest at least a minimum amount of vitamins. One day he impressed me at lunchtime with a deed hardly inferior to the miracle of the seven loaves and fishes: Forced by our mother to eat just a little fork-full of spinach, he vomited about a liter of bright green mush onto his plate.

Up until that point I had never quite understood why some people detested any foods whatsoever. But at that moment I realized that these revulsions were not really about taste, color or consistency after all, but simply about having your life in your own hands, about being able to fashion the space of your own body as you saw fit. And in that moment I realized what an immense deficit I had – I who ate everything suddenly felt like a creature without a will of its own, a child without qualities, nothing but a rag without character.

That was the hour of chard. Today I can hardly reconstruct why it was chard in particular that fell from grace – it is possible that I had previously exhibited a certain reluctance towards this legume. But from that moment onwards I refused to let chard in any shape or form anywhere near my body – and I did so successfully. If I was invited for dinner somewhere later on, I proclaimed, not without a certain sense of pride, that I would eat “everything – except for chard”. If I was occasionally asked why I did not eat this specific green I would always supply the same, highly differentiated answer: “I hate it!” The formula behind my fiery anti-chardism could possibly have read: “I do not eat that – therefore I am.”

Over a quarter of a century passed without my coming into contact with chard. But then one day I signed a fateful contract – with an organic farm that promised to supply me with seasonal vegetables on a weekly basis. It was a pact with the devil – because, as I would soon find out, the veggie-subscription consisted almost entirely of spinach and chard. First I turned pale, then I tried exorcist curses in order to expel the abhorrent stalk from my life – but nothing worked. I was able to gift the legume to my neighbors and friends a couple of times, but eventually, the day came.

The first bite was so terrible it made me gag in parts of my body I had not even known existed. The second was no better and the third – well, to my terrific horror I had to observe that the vegetable suddenly lay in my mouth like a delicate, pleasantly scented green, aromatic and tasting like an amalgamation of spinach, carrots and beetroot, with a distinctive end note that was both bitter and sweet at the same time, and sometimes also agreeably sour. Should I have vomited it onto my kitchen table in order to salvage my independence? I did not do so, for too weak was I. On the contrary – at the next arising opportunity I stuffed some raw chard into my mouth, which, in fact, you should not do too often as this may lead to kidney stones (due to the so-called oxalic acid, which also makes raw chard somewhat less palatable). The herbaceous, bitter and heavily earthy aroma seemed so profound and multi-layered to me that it unexpectedly reminded me of a very old pinot noir – and it continued to have an effect in the mouth, changed on my gums, assumed all kinds of fragrant flavors, becoming exotic-fruity, then turnip-like, fleshy-bloody, withering marshy landscape, pinewood, dune. Had there not also been the fierce, furry after-taste drying out the mouth, that scratchy over-acidification of the pharynx and the esophagus, my kidney stones would have rejoiced.

Since then I know that chard is a profoundly evil, abysmally low vegetable. Which is why I attack it with my longest kitchen knife at every opportunity. I cut its sallow spine from its green body, roll its leaves until I hear its ribs bursting, dissect it, let it sweat in fat or in the oven and finally strangle it with oil, lemon, white sauce.

There is no need to shout it from the rooftops – humankind's true avengers have always operated undercover. If I am invited for dinner anywhere nowadays I have a new formula at the ready: "I eat everything except for large sheep's eyes" – in the silent hope that nobody will be deterred by my words.

LIME

I was in love. And as such highly attentive to the flavors of the world I was still unfamiliar with. He was called Matthew and was the son of an English-German couple that moved to our neighborhood one day. He had blonde hair, like me, but his blue eyes shone through long slits. His skin was fair and waxy and looked as if it had been formed by air and light. His

voice was soft and melodious, restrained like his light brown cords and clear like his impeccably ironed shirts.

I loved him because he was handsome and because I sensed that he was the cause of a new feeling I was experiencing. And I was convinced that I could get something from him, something special, that had something to do with the big secret surrounding him – or was it just me shrouding him in it? Matthew was seven years old, just like me – but he had already lived in Japan, South Africa, England, and Brazil. He was used to being a stranger and had a gentle melancholy approach to things, as if they were always about to disappear.

I was in love, and whenever I saw him my face began glowing. I had an enormous thirst. All I ever thought of now was him, I adapted my way to school to suit his habits, I waited for him, I skulked around his house, I verily lay in wait for him. I had, however, no idea of what I actually wanted to achieve, of what I had in mind. And my uncertainty was probably also a reason why no real friendship was able to develop.

One day Matthew pulled a small, bright green fruit from his trouser pocket, and without saying a word handed it to me. I had never seen anything like it before: “Is that a green mandarin?” I asked. He smiled, bringing his eyelids closer together to form even narrower slits; nonetheless it seemed as if a new shadow were passing across his face.

I carried the fruit home as if it were a treasure, locked myself in my room, sat down on my bed and moved the green ball through my hand. Its skin felt smooth and waxy, its aroma seemed strange to me and reminded me a bit of the eucalyptus sweets I sometimes sucked. Ultimately I tried to peel it – and was a little perplexed by how difficult it was to separate the thin skin from the light flesh. Today I can no longer exactly say what impression the fruit’s aroma made on me – all I know is that it seemed excitingly strange to me.

When, the following day, I went past Matthew’s house again, two men were carrying a flower-patterned sofa through the garden to a big truck. Matthew and his parents had already left. I have absolutely no memory of how I dealt with this first major loss in my life – the removal men with the flowery sofa are the last mental image of this love story.

At the time limes were hardly known in Switzerland – in any case not among the people I associated with. Yet many years later, when I tried my first caipirinha, Matthew’s pale face reappeared immediately – and with it the memory of the rare glow the boy had brought into my life. Since those early years I have cut open thousands of limes and used them in all sorts of ways in my kitchen. And yet the greenish, resinous, rosy, lilac-like aroma of the fruit, its salty acidity and its dry sweetness keep on reminding me of Matthew and his farewell present. That is perhaps why even today the tiny fruit, which is only green because it is always harvested before it is ripe, has remained curiously foreign to me – exotic and full of undreamt promises.

BAY LEAF

"I do not believe in God – why should there be such a thing? Maurice said. He briefly swirled the Morellino di Scansano in his glass, sniffed it and shut his eyes: "Plums and shit", he mumbled.

"If there were a God after all", mighty Danilo said in a deep voice, "you would have to say, as would Woody Allen: 'I hope he has a good excuse'."

The two men laughed. I was travelling round Italy with Maurice Péfort in order to learn about what he called "eating properly". Maurice, who has written poems and essays about kitchen culture, spices, offal, wine and other things, was for many years my teacher when it came to matters of the belly – and is still a good friend today, one with whom despite his biblical age you can still get nice and drunk. For three days we had been staying with an artist, who owned a magnificent property near Grosseto, a magical wine cellar, and his even more enchanting wife, who was called Sarah and was an excellent cook. She had a slender, lithe-looking body, short, dark-brown hair, and eyes which were green like moss. I found the veins on her neck and on her arms, which my imagination followed well into her clothes, even more fascinating. She was considerably younger than Danilo, but about ten years older than me, which added spice to my desire.

"I do not believe in God, but I am convinced", Maurice pontificated, "that there is more to the world than its material being, that beyond fathomable reality there is still something unfathomable for which we have no name – but without which there would be no beauty in the world. It appears when we listen to music, look at paintings, at the fading sun that has just disappeared beyond the horizon."

"Or when we eat my wife's pigeon", Danilo added, while Sarah put a large pot on the table before sitting down next to her husband. It went quiet in the room – Maurice considered any form of conversation during a meal a "disrespectful bad habit". And his friends knew this, too. The light of a cool winter's day fell through the windows, while the air inside the home was filled with aromatic steam. A crackling fire was smoldering in the fireplace and all that could be heard from the people sat around the table was a quiet smacking of lips, tongues and teeth, as these nibbled the moist meat off the dainty skeletons with precision. I found it hard to concentrate on the food – the sauce's flowery freshness, interspersed with a few hints of camphor, seemed to me to be directly connected to Sarah's armpits. I did not just see skin touching skin in her delicate underarm fold through the transparent fabric of her blouse – I was positively in that space, lodged into her scent.

"The question simply is", Maurice had finished his pigeon, its bones now spread out on the edge of his plate like victor's laurels, "whether we are simply imagining all of this and the splendor of life really has no support in what we, for want of a better word, call reality."

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked – probably only in order not to remain completely mute.

“Well the big question clearly is: Does the poetic element reside in the world – or is this just a trick we play, a construction made up of words, sounds, brush marks, or in the worst case even just convention?”

Sarah cleared away the plates, and as she walked away from the table I saw that she was barefoot, she had evidently taken her shoes off during the meal. I could not drag my gaze away from these feet, their muscles seemed to dance for me, to call for me – before disappearing, much too quickly, into the kitchen. How I would have liked to help Sarah with the washing up, but I just did not dare follow her – maybe also because I realized that the two gentlemen needed me to be the audience of their little dispute.

“Does that even play a role?” Danilo now growled: “After all, we imagine colors too, and smells – without those phantasmagorias we would have no orientation. So why should we not also imagine something that lends our lives some luster and beauty?”

Sarah placed a bowl of pears in white wine on the table, then stopped behind my chair and placed her hands on my backrest. It was as though I could feel the warmth of her fingers, heated up from her work in the kitchen, on my neck. I froze.

“When I cook it is bay leaves in particular that are able to light a flame in the foods – without them, many dishes stay flat and without mystery”, Sarah said, and I was now certain I could feel her finger tips on my skin: “It is impossible to describe or explain: but it is still very real to me.”

The two men nodded. They evidently did not know quite what to make of Sarah’s bay leaf intermezzo. It was only then that I realized that all of her dishes had indeed been cooked with bay leaves – the grilled liver in pig’s caul, the pigeon braised in jus and now also the pears in white wine.

I was not used to eating extensive lunches – and on top of this I was barely able to follow the conversation between the two men. Sarah had vanished to the kitchen once more, so I lay down on the sofa next to the fireplace for a moment.

The sun was now hitting the windows horizontally and Sarah’s body cast a sharp-edged shadow on the wall as she stood up straight next to the bed. I approached her, coming close enough to feel her breath on my face. My fingers slowly traced a blue vein of hers that flowed from her shoulder over the front of her ribcage like a river running wild, across her belly and past her hip bones to the top of her thighs. She sank onto the bed and I kneeled above her to kiss her neck, her mouth, her breasts. She smelled of nutmeg and eucalyptus, of cloves and green leaves – her sweat tasted sour in a fresh way and sweet at the same time. Now I felt her hand on my thigh and the tension my arousal created sent blissful shivers down my back and buttocks. But in the next moment I brushed the covers off the bed in an awkward movement and it was only then that I saw we were lying on a gigantic pile of bay leaves, which now fluttered off in all directions, dancing around us like blossoms – so wild I could suddenly no longer see anything at all.

I opened my eyes wide and Sarah’s face was right in front of mine. She was kneeling next to the sofa and really did have her right hand placed on

my thigh in a friendly way – while extending her left hand towards me with a cup of espresso. Maurice and Danilo stood behind her in their coats; they evidently wanted to take me on a walk with them. My member, erect from the dream, was pushing up against the textile of my trousers a mere five centimeters from Sarah's fingers, and I felt myself blushing with such vehemence that my head turned into a fireball almost instantly.

Over a quarter of a century has passed since that day in the Maremma. I use bay leaves in my cooking generously and often, in order to light a fire in my dishes – and sometimes Sarah, who died in a car accident a few years ago, stands at the stove with me as I do so, and I feel the touch of her kitchen-warm fingers on my skin, hear the blood rushing through her veins. The smell of bay leaves also reminds me of Maurice's big question, to which I still do not know the answer. Since those younger years I have however been haunted by the odd thought that there might be a connection between the poetic and the embarrassing – after all, both put a shine on the everyday in their particular way. And if the embarrassing is of this world, why not poetry, too?

MILK

I hated it – and for good reason. I had human nature on my side and the great minds of dietetics would without doubt have supported my cause. Admittedly, at the time I certainly did not yet think about whether such behavior was justified or not. I simply hated it, and if it somehow came too close to me, I screamed my head off.

Yet everything had started off so peacefully. I have no recollection of that time, but if I am to believe what is generally assumed, it must have been delightful to me to suck with my tiny baby lips from my mother's breasts something that I would many years later be introduced to by the name of milk. But like many a source of the good, the breast of breasts also ran dry at some point – and it became time to discover the rest of the culinary world.

If it is true what I was later told, then I pounced on anything I could get my hands on with a voracious appetite – including liquor-filled chocolates and cat's tails (an early influence indeed). I once also munched down a matriculation essay that my father had carelessly left next to my playpen. For the life of me I cannot remember whether I liked the taste of ink. But my young father was so worried about his future as a teacher that he gave the student top grades in order to cover up the embarrassing incident. Someone out there, born in 1948 or so, may thus owe his career to nothing more than my appetite. Who knows, maybe that student even became a writer and now occasionally asks himself whether it was all just a big misunderstanding.

To return to milk. As large as my appetite for all manner of things, including unspeakable ones, turned out to be (and I did not shy away from experiments that had to be reversed in the hospital) – if anyone came near

me with a baby bottle, the force of my protest drove everything out the house that had legs or wings to carry it. My father even claimed it was me who pushed our hamster to suicide, as it suddenly stopped eating and was eventually found lying lifeless in its wheel.

It is hard to say whether my aversion had a medical basis or not. The greater part of the human population does, after all, slowly lose the ability to break down lactose even when being nursed and is then inherently lactose intolerant. It is only the peoples of North Europe, for whom dairy farming plays an especially central role, who have over time developed the ability to digest lactose as grown-ups, too. My origins lie with these tribes – but maybe it was precisely this which was the secret message behind my bawling: I did not want to be a Northerner with cheese-like, pale skin, thin blonde hair and stupidly blue eyes – and I would much rather have been born further south, where people do not scurry around with cold hands and numb toes for six months of the year.

Of course my mother tried everything she could think of to somehow make milk palatable to me – after all, at the time the white stuff was seen as indispensable for healthy growth. But all temperatures and aromas she employed to dupe me were in vein: I instantly recognized milk in any guise whatsoever.

At some point my providers laid down their lactase arms and finally left me in peace. In view of the fuss I kicked up when faced with just a few drops of milk, my entourage of course did not think to try out other dairy products on me, such as cheese or yoghurt. Not to forget that in those days, margarine was considered as being much better for you than butter and was most certainly regarded as being much more modern. Astonishingly, my parents did not even give me chocolate – although I now have an inkling that this might have been done, at least partially, out of revenge. So I lived happily for about six or seven years without any contact with the white enemy.

I only met with the epiphany shortly after starting school – it came in the guise of Master Ming. I was a strangely greedy child and skipped none of the many illnesses children generally catch – be it measles, mumps or rubella, all viruses felt completely at home in my body. I even wheezed through whooping cough twice. For which reason I often spent weeks in a small village up near the Brünig pass, where my grandparents would dote on me most wonderfully in their little holiday home. One day, as I was just curing myself of the last residues of meningitis, a small excursion led me past a building that reminded me a little of the kitchen at my school. This was due to the facade being covered in diverse metal instruments and large tools, the function of which defeated me. I stopped in front of the house in order to get a closer look at things. Suddenly, the door flung open. A thick cloud of white steam puffed towards me. And there he stood in the midst of it all: A white giant, with a shiny, silver liquid dripping off his armor and onto the floor. I was terrified by the sight of him. Frozen to the spot, I stared at this creature, convinced that he must be God the Almighty himself – or, failing this, the devil (my grandparents where quite

religious). The man noticed that he had scared me and quickly disappeared into the interior of his house, in order to return, a short moment later, with a piece of cheese, which he thrust into my little hand with a serious look on his face. I knew cheese – after all, my parents and grandparents ate it on a regular basis – but it would have never crossed my mind to eat the pale stuff instead of the smoked sausage, salami or fish fingers, which, at the time, were my favorite foods. But what was I to do in that instant? After all, this was clearly a gift of the gods. I meekly put the piece in my mouth, convinced that something dramatic was about to happen. And it did. I perceived an intense burn on my mucous membranes and my tongue felt as though it had been paralyzed, like a salty, swollen rag. I think tears rolled down my cheeks at that moment. And the devil continued to stand in front of me, unsmiling.

The fire slowly subsided and the alarm bells in my head grew a little quieter. Then, my nerves began to send new signals to my brain, which seemed very much out of joint with my predicament. Absurdly, they triggered a happy feeling in me and deep satisfaction.

Unfortunately I no longer remember the aromas I perceived that day, and which flavor it was that took my heart by storm. But I can still recreate in my mind the joyful thrill that gripped me as a door to a new world was suddenly flung open and I stepped through it, for that was exactly how the moment felt to me. I had had a similar experience a short while ago in my father's library – when for the first time I pulled an entirely unknown book from the bookshelf and understood what the letters lined up there in front of me meant. It was the miracle of reading. And this, now, was the miracle of milk. When it finally happened, the devil took the white cap off his hair and became human – I think he even smiled for a brief second.

Mr. Ming, as the master cheese maker was called (in that area, everyone was called Gasser, Vogler or Ming), was not a man of many words – in fact, I am not sure he ever said anything to me. But whenever I turned up at his dairy over the next few days, he gave me a different piece to try – and a cup of milk or whey to go with it, which I poured down my childhood throat like precious nectar, in tiny little sips.

On returning to the city after three months in the mountains I was a different person – a milk-person like all my ancestors, with cheesy skin and thin blonde hair.

SALTED ANCHOVIES

Her clothes were much too thick for the midsummer weather. Especially as other young women lounged about the restaurant terraces on the port of La Cotinière with a beach towel draped around their hips, dressed in bikinis or light T-shirts. By contrast, her thin body was clad in heavy jeans and a brown-grey wool pullover. Yet she did not seem to be sweating, which might have been thanks to the careful movements with which she slid over to a table a little further away, in the shade of an 'Orangina' parasol and

just a few meters from where I was sitting, cadavers of sucked-out crabs, oysters and whelks drifting through a sea of molten ice in front of me.

Without asking, the waiter placed a carafe with water, a glass of white wine and two plates on the table in front of the young woman. She pushed her thin blonde hair out of her face, sat up straight as a pole, then took half a baguette out of her bag with the uttermost of care, followed by a small tin of anchovies, and placed both on the white paper tablecloth as accurately as if she had been decorating the window of a jeweler's shop. She then proceeded to take a knife and, absorbed in calm concentration, cut the bread into exactly twelve slices – and each of these was, without a doubt, precisely 12 millimeters thick. She then placed the slices on the plates in front of her in flower shapes, before opening the tin containing the little fish, with a decisive, short jolt of her index finger – I could hear the gas escape from the can and smell the odor of the fermented anchovies: slightly bubbly, cheesy-salty, fishy-gingerbreadly. She pulled the metal strip off the tin completely, picking twelve filets out of the oil with her fingers and arranging them on the cuts of bread in a circle. She then dripped the remaining oil onto the bread – I tried to count the drops, but the Gros Plant du Pays Nantais had somewhat clouded my vision. I did however then notice all of the cats that had gathered around her table, trying to count them, but did not quite managing to, as the animals kept moving – but I am certain there were twelve of them.

The young woman looked at her bread-anchovy artwork for several minutes. Then she took the plates and placed them, without looking down, on the floor on both sides of the white plastic chair she was sitting on. The cats ran up quickly and lined up around the plates in such a way that their bodies formed two furry, silky-shiny flowers around the blonde girl's feet. Each took a fish between their teeth, pulled it into their muzzle with little jerking movements, and then licked the spicy oil off the top of the bread. As if by command, the cats then all disengaged from the flower formation at the same instant and disappeared in all directions.

The young woman put the plates back on the table – the anchovies had disappeared and the surfaces of the bread glistened with the animal's spittle, yet the slices lay on the plates in exactly the same position as before. Now she brought the glass of white wine to her lips for the first time and carefully took a sip. She closed her eyes, picked a slice of bread up from one of the plates and pushed it between her lips. I could hear her mouth draw the moisture from the surface with a small sucking noise, the crust burst between her teeth with a little crackle – and I thought I could feel a waft of salt drifting over to me from her; it was as though she wanted to tell me something with it. Having eaten the slice of bread she opened her eyes and suddenly turned her gaze towards me. It seemed to me her pupils were slightly elongated, her irises a watery light grey. Then she took another sip of wine, closed her eyes once more and brought another slice of bread to her mouth. When she then turned her gaze towards me once more, almost a little inquisitively, the color of her eyes seemed emerald green to me, the next time they looked golden-yellow, dark brown, icy blue, ochre, steel grey,

sand colored, greyish-brown, mother of pearl, brown-red, honey-yellow and finally oyster-green.

I ordered another glass of Gros Plant from the waiter and hoped it would give me the courage to talk to the young woman. I quickly went to the bathroom for a minute to splash some cold water in my face and rinse out my mouth. When I returned to the terrace the young woman had disappeared and her table had been cleared. I walked over to the waiter, pointing to the 'Orangina' parasol: "La fille qui était assise là ..." – "Quelle fille" he asked, then drawing up his brows suggestively: "Ah, Monsieur cherche une fille!" I paid hastily. As I left the terrace I walked past her table. I thought I could make out some traces of oil on the otherwise spotless paper table cloth – but most notably, the table bore a small brass plate embossed with the number '12' in black writing. Of course I looked for the young woman at the port of La Cotinière – but to be honest I was a bit scared of actually finding her.

A few days later, back in Zurich, I tried to tempt the neighbor's cat with an anchovy sandwich. She sniffed at it curiously, then turned away bored and started to scratch herself behind the ears with her paws.

