

# Los Angeles Letters

November - December 2001



Charles Shere

front cover: Two Pears, drawing on tablepaper,  
Ciudad Restaurant, Los Angeles  
the author

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## 1: Aromas and flavors and a drive to Los Angeles Los Angeles, November 28, 2001

PUTTING HER COFFEETOP DOWN in front of her I kissed her nape. You smell good, I said; you always smell good.

It's a familiar smell, of course, after forty-five years. It's hard to tell whether it's the familiarity of the scent, or the scent itself, that's so reassuring, so comforting.

Then tonight at dinner there came, unexpectedly, after the first course and before the main one, a softboiled egg with some sliced white truffle on top.

Truffle, and especially white truffle I think, is the same kind of scent. I suppose all scents have in common that they're incredibly in the present. I mean: you can recall past scents, look forward maybe to scents to come. But when you smell something you're incredibly in the present.

On the way down, for example, listening to the radio, we heard the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, and with the very first measures I was taken back to the early 1950s when I heard it on the KSRO evening concert, really listened to it, experienced it as fully as I could have in my highschool years.

The sunset, seen from the downhill slope from the Grapevine, was similar: rose and red beyond grey clouds and monochrome landscape, it was a vision that recalled previous sunsets. Not only that: it was itself evanescent, ephemeral, changing from moment to moment.

But the scent of the truffles, like that of dirt, of hay, of gasoline — the scent was completely a present moment. Maybe it's because of the intimate mechanics linking scent to the brain: it's all skin and nerves, like touch; not abstract like vision — or even, to a musician at least, hearing.

This has been a disorienting few days: a drive Sunday from snow in the Sierra, through the surprising and improbable rolling hills near Farmington and across the flat Delta, then up through the familiar creases of Napa and Sonoma counties home.

Two days to deal with the Post Office, set up a temporary greenhouse for our citrus, have the car checked out for the next trip.

Then yesterday's drive, stopping in Berkeley to pick up materiel for Lindsey's assignment this week: for we're in Los Angeles to make ice cream for 400 people gathered at the Marriott Downtown for a dinner honoring Alice.

How long it used to take, going to Los Angeles, forty years ago or so; and how alarmingly easy it is now! Six hours twenty minutes, Mapquest said, and in the end it was right in spite of a couple of slow stretches on the highway, and the inevitable congestion in the city when you arrive at five o'clock.

Where will you have lunch, Cristina had asked while Lindsey was loading pears into the car; in the car, I said, on bread and salami; siamo paesani, you know. She smiled, and it was a smile of complicity. It's much the best way to eat on Highway 5: thick slices of Acme sourdough spread with thin slices of soppressata from the Oakville Grocery, bought ten days ago and forgotten in the surfeit of Thanksgiving.

Then dinner at Campanile, one of whose chef owners, Mark Peel, is orchestrating this honorary dinner. What a pleasure to walk into a noted restaurant's kitchen door, past the garbage and through the dishroom and into the kitchen, and smell only wonderful smells along the way, and find a good-humored chef carefully trimming the fat from beef-steaks!

A friend had complained about one of the dishes on the menu, saying it didn't make sense, so of course I began with it: a grilled sardine wrapped around a bit of brandade, served on a nest of shredded lettuces with discreet bits of grapefruit strewn through.

Frivolous in conception, demanding of preparation, and both interesting and rewarding in the mouth: several textures and flavors first colliding, then merging. It makes sense.

I know many of you are impatient with food writing, so I'll stop with that. The handsome restaurant — which used to be Charlie Chaplin's town house courtyard, and retains its tile floor, its fountain, and the windows looking down on both sides from grey stone mansion walls — began to fill about seven-thirty, when we were finishing our dinner, and we drove back across town, past the amazing front-yard Christmas decorations, twice-life-size plastic storks looking down on infant Jesus in one case, to hotel and sleep.



## 2: Pairs

Los Angeles, November 29, 2001

TO CAMPANILE AGAIN, then, this morning, after one of those expensive hotel breakfasts. It's a straight shot down Third Street, which I always associate now with Paolo, because once, years ago when he was living down here, we drove the route with him, and he told us how much he enjoyed it.

I can understand it. It's an amazing transect, even more so now, say fifteen years later, with all the changes downtown, where we're staying.

What was Bunker Hill when I first came here, nearly fifty years ago, is now a tight downtown cluster of skyscrapers, each more stylish than the next, contained within the vortex of a whirlpool of freeways. Our Marriott Hotel is on the edge of this cluster.

The valet brings our car, I slip him a tip, and we turn left onto Third. In one block we've left this *luxe, calme, et volupté*; we cross the freeway, and we're in the seedy Los Angeles I knew in 1952. The same snug bungalows, the same mangy palms. The ten-year-old cars are different, of course.

The three or four miles of Third Street — sorry, I have no maps or references here — take us on from here, to Koreatown, to a transitional zone of middleclass apartments, to that curious enclave of lower-upperclass houses, past the golf club, and into southern Hollywood.

At Loma, or thereabouts, there's an amazing brick building, a residence hotel now I suppose, a huge castle of a place that should have been built of stone but was entirely done in brick instead, and has lasted all these years through all these earthquakes, where stucco boxes have failed.

We cross all those curious Los Angeles streets. The hopeful English-yearning ones, like Wiltern and Rossmore and Bixel; the louche modish ones like Normandie and Beaudry; offbeat ones like Bonnie Brae, Carandolet.

There are states: Vermont, New Hampshire; universities: Harvard, Oxford; all streets whose names seem to have nothing to do with the kinds of buildings that were put on them, or the uses to which those buildings have been put in the succeeding phases of their devolution — as it has been, I'm afraid, in far too many cases.

I can't imagine how many times over the years I've taken this fast east-west drive across this city. Wilshire Boulevard is marginally more interesting for architecture; Sunset Boulevard is more storied; Sixth Street is faster and more exciting for its hills. But Third Street will always seem both more direct, in terms of elapsed time and ease, and more disconcerting, in terms of the variety of its commercial signs, its residential architecture, its

neighborhoods and subcultures.

*Grande, Sabroso, y Economico*: Big Mac. \$1.99 Chinese dinner. Mexican Breakfast All Day Rice Beans and Tortillas. *Braces / Frenos* (a sign not for a brake shop but an orthopedic appliance outfitter.) At one end the Downtown Marriott; at the other Trader Joe's, on the corner of La Brea, which leads us down to Wilshire and Campanile Restaurant.

There Lindsey and I stand across from one another, a five-gallon plastic bucket at our feet, and peel pears. We've brought four cases of Comice pears, the nicest she's ever seen, Lindsey says, big fragrant perfectly ripe pears from Oakridge Farms in Washington State, seventy-four dollars a case, pears so big my two hands can't fully contain them.

We halve them, quarter them, core them. Then we peel them with the sharp stainless-steel paring knives we bought yesterday when Lindsey discovered she'd forgotten to bring her knife case.

*Lever les pelures*, say the French; lift the peelings. Maybe twenty percent of the time that's what you do, but the rest of the time you slice under the peel, a little too far. I hate to think how much of the best of the pear is going into the garbage with these skins.

The peeling is greenish yellow, speckled with tiny dots of white or occasionally darker pigment; and it is remarkably solid and impermeable, this skin, the better to keep in an incredible fragrance, pears at their best, juicy, aromatic, complex.

I can't see any pears, least of all these, without thinking of Wallace Stevens, whose poem on pears I'd quote if I had it here; or of Braque, who so nicely rendered pears in an illustration for a book of poems by Pierre Reverdy; or of our fabulous Comice pear tree on Curtis Street, now probably gone entirely; or of the one that's replaced it on Eastside Road, much smaller, hardly taller than I am, but which gave us thirty big juicy pears this year.

I like to pare pears. For one thing I've always liked anagrams. Emma comes to tea every now and then and puts a word on the refrigerator; when she leaves I deconstruct it and make another word or two. "Enlargement," she writes; "Mental green," I respond.

And there are few greater pleasures than doing something simple, like peeling fruit, with someone special, especially when the result will bring the two together in as intimate a pleasure as eating.

Not to brag, but I can't help remembering two previous occasions: shaping hundreds of cookies in a small crowded kitchen at Rockefeller Center with Edna Lewis, then in her late seventies I think, willowy, graceful, incredibly wise, and immensely good-humored.

And shelling beans in his apartment kitchen with John Cage, also in New York, also in his seventies, willowy, graceful, wise, and good-humored.

Today we're cutting up these pears to make sherbet. In the next kitchen the pastry team of Campanile is making ice cream to Lindsey's specifications, an egg custard ice cream flavored with Chartreuse. It will join the pear sherbet, and cookies I don't yet know about, in this special dinner being served Saturday night for Alice.

Mark Peel has invited Chez Panisse chefs from over the years to produce this feast. Chris Lee will be there to cook the lamb. Jeremiah Tower will make a porcini soup. Jean-Pierre is putting scallops and mâche together for a salad.

It'll all be quite wonderful. But most wonderful, to me, will be Lindsey, her ice cream, her pears. I read a fan letter she shyly showed me the other day, praising her fine-mindedness, her grace and taste. To me she epitomizes the most mysterious combination there is, the sturdy and the subtle, the peasant and the scholar. This will embarrass her when she reads it, but I can't help it.

It is a combination that seems appropriate. I hesitate to call it uniquely American; I'm sure there are plenty like her in other countries. But there's something in our melting pot, even in this improbable transect that is Los Angeles, that makes possible this kind of co existence. It's facilitated, of course, by communication, travel, prosperity, general education. But what it has at bottom is freedom: freedom to roam, to learn, to express, to develop, to harvest, to nourish, to know.

I'll let you know how it all works out.



Lindsey working on the base for the ice cream, Campanile, November 30 2001



### 3. Give is a Good Girl

Los Angeles, December 1, 2001

SO WROTE HESIOD IN ONE of my favorite books, *The Works and Days*, as translated by — but I don't remember his name, and I'm not home to get the book down. [Later note: Richard Lattimore.]

Give is a good girl, he wrote in this book of stern advice to his goodfornothing kid brother, but grab is a bad one. Or, as I said with equal sententiousness to David this morning at breakfast, the two most important things are generosity and gratitude.

It was my cousin Hazel who most recently drilled the lesson about gratitude into my head, on a drive last May through the farm country of northeastern Oklahoma, where our grandmother grew up. We were talking about how hard it was in the old days, when the kids were always barefoot, summer and winter, and Great-Grandma still brought up her water by the bucket from the well at the end of a rope, hand over hand, no windlass or pump to help her.

Life was so hard, I hazarded, that it made men do terrible things. I was thinking

about the men who abandoned their families, in some cases I think so that they'd be able to fall back on charity.

Yes, Hazel said; I hope such times never come back. But the main thing is, she went on, to be grateful. She didn't go on to say it, but what she meant is that it is by being grateful for what we have that we can appreciate having it. And ingratitude, in some strange way, invites the loss of what we have to be grateful for.

There's a small homeless camp under the overpass at the other end of the block from our hotel. Across the street is the World Trade Center — Los Angeles's version of it; it's amazing how many centers a world can boast — with an amazing panoply of glitz and glamor.

The Westin Bonaventure is across the street and down a block. It seems to be quite empty. I'm just back from lunch there: only one of the perhaps twenty restaurants is open, and only three tables were served in it.

There is no one on the sidewalks. Drivers look askance at us, Peg and I in street clothes, Lindsey and David in their chef's jackets. I suppose we looked like two crazies being ushered back to the psycho ward by white-jacketed orderlies.

Forty-nine years ago, when I first came to this city, that area across Figueroa Street was not Skyscraper City. It was a steep hill crowded with decrepit "Victorian" houses, reached by Angel's Flight, a cableway from one of those downtown streets, Olive or Hope or Flower, I forget which. I was seventeen, a naive country kid wearing a beret, badly scarred with acne, smoking Dominos or Wings, whichever was cheapest.

I remember getting off the Greyhound and stepping out of the rain into a coffee shop and meeting what seemed like an old lady, she was probably in her forties, who said she wrote poems and was looking for a song composer, and I volunteered to write her songs, and she showed me her poems, which even I could tell were hopelessly dull and unmarketable.

The coffee shops and shoe repairs and barbers and stationers are all moved inside now, and they sell espresso and hairstyles and Montblancs, and are open only Monday through Friday, catering to officeworkers who drive here, I guess, from somewhere else. It's a morose Saturday today, threatening to rain, cold and windy, and there's no one on those plazas.

But I have much to be grateful for. I walked into the Marriott kitchen at noon and took photos of Lindsey and David as they crumpled their lace cookies into fancy cups for tonight's banquet dessert.

You found your camera, they marveled. It's a long story, I said.

I bought this camera in Portland a month ago, a digital one, to replace the cameras that were stolen from our car last summer, in Provence. It's a snazzy camera; I'll never learn all its complexities. I like it a lot. But one of its great advantages is also a disadvantage: it is about as big as a pack of cigarettes (as I recall), and slips out of the pocket easily.

Last night we had dinner at Lucques, one of my favorite restaurants anywhere, and I took it along. The whole point of having such a camera is to have it with you; a camera too big to carry gets left home, and makes no pictures.

We ate well and long, Lindsey and David and Jean-Pierre and I, and talked about many things, most of them having to do either with the restaurant business or with How Things Are.

What both have in common is generosity and gratitude. I've been thinking about these things since the summer, when an intense personal experience set me off on these long-term ruminations. I'm not ready to write about that yet, though I've alluded to it a few times; it has to wait. But I can say it connects our stimulating month in Venice, and the remarkable family love and celebration of the Chez Panisse 30th birthday, and the terrible events of September 11.

In thinking about Alice Waters at the time of the Birthday it occurred to me that

what most impresses me in her persona — which I've known pretty well these thirty years and more — can be summed up in three words: Generosity, Discrimination, Ethics. Put those together, I kidded, and you have trouble.

All the good restaurants I know of have the first two qualities. Certainly Campanile and Lucques do, down here in Los Angeles. We talked around these things last night at Lucques. And Ethics came up, too, as we talked about Sustainability, and Justice and Injustice, and the pressing need — Jean-Pierre brought it up, thinking about his recent visit to Morocco — to bridge the yawning gap between rich and poor; a gap the more visible now that tourism, a principle industry in such countries, threatens to collapse entirely.

Yes, David pointed out, but here we are eating much more than we need to in an expensive restaurant on Melrose Avenue; who are we to talk about responsibility? And maybe this is what the human is, maybe we're programmed to overreach, to exploit and ruin, and it isn't finally natural to try to contain these urges.

(Of course I paraphrase here, and protect my friends by suppressing surnames.)

Our mindfulness, Lindsey said without using that specific word, is where we exercise this responsibility. It's in being aware of these paradoxes, and their bigger context, that we can deal with what you call hypocrisy. The farmers, truckers, waiters, dishwashers, all participate in this moment. And we haven't the right, I added, to destroy things for the other species, even if we were intended to bring about our own destruction.

Just after midnight, after brandade and shortribs and Vacqueyras and grappa, we stepped into our topfloor hotel room and I began emptying my pockets. The camera was missing. I couldn't believe it. I had it at the restaurant, I was positive, I'd fondled it a couple of times thinking to take a photo and then left it pocketed unwilling to disturb the crowded dining room.

It must have fallen out of my pocket at table, or perhaps when I reached for a tip for the valet parker, or then maybe in the car as I drove home. I called the restaurant: not there. I went downstairs and inspected the car, not yet put in the garage: not there. I notified Security at the hotel, and tried to forget about it.

This morning I called the insurance company, and called around town to see if I could afford to replace it, and then talked to my friend Dan, who we'll meet for breakfast tomorrow. Dan's a painter, a wonderful artist, a very sympathetic and loving guy with a big Irish heart; he and Tony, equally warm and humane, have lived here for twenty years, and we try to see them when we can.

You sound bummed out, Dan said, and I told him why. Do you want me to pray to St. Anthony, he asked, and I immediately thanked him for the offer, and we arranged to meet at his studio in a few hours, and I drove out to Lucques for another hope at finding the camera.

Not there, of course. I got back in the car more dejected than ever, then unaccountably opened the glove compartment. I shut it again quickly: the camera was there, and I didn't believe it. I drove several blocks before opening it again. Yes: it was there. A few more blocks; then I parked and got it out and tried it. Worked perfectly.

At his studio, when he opened the door to let me in, Dan saw in my face that the camera was back. The studio was littered as they generally are with studies and works in progress and finished paintings and art postcards pinned to the wall, and it smelled a little bit of painting studio but more of the bakery next door.

There was a beautiful hand-colored engraving of a pear on the wall, and I told Dan about our pear peeling a few days ago, and the Wallace Stevens poem, which Ann B. e-mailed me yesterday and which I put at the end of this dispatch.

Would Lindsey like the print, Dan asked, Yes, I said, and he wrapped it carefully and gave it to me.

Dan's paintings are earnest, composed, truthful, deep, and beautiful. Some are still lifes; others are portraits, often the head only, sometimes one person or two in an interior.

We talked about the World Series and I wondered if he'd painted baseball players, since he likes geometry and uniforms and intensity and color and eyes. He talked about his visits to Oaxaca, and to Paris, and to Florence, where he's been making prints.

You should think about a series of sacred paintings, I said, noticing Generosity and Discrimination and Ethics finally coming together with Gratitude, and admiring the way what Eric calls Pure Heart manages so often to bring things right.

What is sustainable grows out of modesty and the willingness to let things go, as well as awareness and the determination to make things grow. It's a matter, I think, of being content to let things be what they are.

I think this is what Wallace Stevens is thinking about in the last two lines of this "little teaching piece," written I think about not pears but a painting of pears:

Study of Two Pears

I.  
Opusculum paedagogum.  
The pears are not violas,  
nudes or bottles.  
They resemble nothing else.

II.  
They are yellow forms  
Composed of curves  
Bulging toward the base.  
They are touched red.

III.  
They are not flat surfaces  
Having curved outlines.  
They are round,  
curving toward the top.

IV.  
In the way they are modelled  
There are bits of blue.  
A hard dry leaf hangs  
From the stem.

V.  
The yellow glistens.  
It glistens with various yellows,  
Citrons, oranges and greens  
Flowering over the skin.

VI.  
The shadows of the pears  
Are blobs on the green cloth.  
The pears are not seen  
As the observer wills.



## 2 Healdsburg, three days after —

THE CLIMAX OF THIS TRIP to Los Angeles was that big banquet on Saturday night, and I wasn't there. I helped out by staying out of the way, something I'm getting nearer to perfecting. The chefs were in the hotel kitchens, two huge rooms which hadn't seemed particularly busy until then — I suspect the Marriott is nowhere near normal occupancy.

The downstairs kitchen serves the hotel's restaurant. It's a vast spotless room, about the size of our house, all stainless steel and fluorescent light. I never saw more than two cooks working there, methodically assembling salads or laying out cheese-and-fruit boards and preparing the infrequent entree — by which I mean retrieving it from freezer, readying it in microwave. Judging from the evidence.

Here Chris cooked his lamb racks, and Jean-Pierre his mushroom soup. Upstairs in the banquet kitchen Jeremiah assembled scallops-and-mache salads, and Lindsey baked the cookie cups for her sherbet and ice cream. It was an allstar cast. Someone asked Lindsey why she was giving a week of her life to the event. Are you kidding, she said, I wouldn't miss it for anything. It's Old Home Week.

Many have asked if there was much steam in the kitchen, and some had asked me to document it — that's why I'd taken the camera along. But you can't really photograph something like this. Chefs, who are cooks who lead troops, when they are concentrating on their work, are unphotogenic and undocumentable. You can't take a picture of total concentration. Well, maybe if you're a real photographer: I'm not, any more than a cook is a chef.

So I stayed out of the way, joining the others only for a lackluster lunch at the

Westin, and taking dinner alone at Ciudad, just down the street — a south-of-the-border/Hispanic place that makes a decent Martini, and a plate of twelve or fifteen tapas (too many to be properly served all at once, but they do anyway), and an interesting range of red wines from Chile and Spain and Portugal and Mexico as well as the usual places (offered as tastes, conveniently), and a Spanish brandy to bring all that together and render it digestible.

All of which rendered me ready to return to the Marriott where I stood in the wings watching the chefs take their bows at the end of the night, and then we went down to the lobby for a Party, the chefs all sitting around tiredly drinking Martinis (except Jeremiah, who drank champagne), with rich Los Angeles women (sleek, big hair, black clothes, perfect faces) draped over them, and their men standing around discussing business and sports.

Alice wasn't there, of course; she was just back from New York, and Paris, and Corsica, and had to go on next morning to a similar event in Napa. The rest of us caught up a bit on old times and made small talk and it wasn't long before Lindsey and I left the youngsters to their increasingly watery Martinis and Cosmopolitans and hit the hay.

Sunday morning we had a couple of hours with our friends Dan McCleary and Tony Abatemarco at their breakfast table on fifth Street. The house is a summer cottage, really, from the 1920s, set well back, with a couple of palms and a dog or two in front; a wide-open frame bungalow full of light and books and Dan's paintings, each more assured and insightful and arresting than the last, and Tony's office, small and cluttered with books and knickknacks and small paintings.

And that evening we had dinner at Chaya Brasserie, where we hadn't been in years, because we were going on to see Copenhagen at the nearby Wiltshire Theater — talky and Important, but we saw it from the balcony, much too far away, and it was Sunday night, the cast had already been through the piece that afternoon and half-a-dozen times earlier in the week, and were, I thought, a little tired.

And so am I, and so must you be by now, so we'll leave it at that. .



## 5: Epilogue

Healdsburg, December 11 2001

**BUT NOT SO FAST.** Whiting writes a nice response:

I've been very impressed with your meditations on gratitude and generosity. With them I'd put the capacity for profound admiration. The critic — in any medium — who doesn't have it is worthless.

And so the retired critic adds a little more profound admiration here, just to put things in perspective. A day or two after getting home from Los Angeles Lindsey and I rode over, with Eric and Emma, to a piece of property behind Bob Hopkins's place to pick olives. It was a classic sunny Sonoma County day in December, the sunlight raking in low over the fields, the cornflower-blue sky set almost tensely — and yet serenely — against the bright electric green of the new grass.

Bob's neighbor, who owns the property, is ninety-three, and in a convalescent hospital. He is speaking chiefly Yiddish these days, Bob says, although he'd never spoken it in his adult life. Perhaps he's conversing with his Maker. In any case Bob's picked here before; last year Thérèse and Eric helped; this year's crew has spread a bit wider. Bob sends the black olives off to Glen Ellen to be made into oil, but we were attracted to the green varieties.

The trees were loaded and easy to pick. We stood on tall three-legged orchard ladders, holding a bucket with our left hands, raking the olives off the branches with our right. Below, Lindsey and Emma picked up dropped olives from the tarps we'd spread on

the ground. We four picked silently for the most part, silently and methodically, and when I wasn't concentrating on the olives, or on the day, I thought about that day spent peeling pears. Norman writes:

i think for me the act of peeling so many pears would be the sheer shere  
joy of focusing on something so simple and straightforward and trying to do it right —  
it would be a meditation

perhaps bordering on the edge of carpal tunnel brain syndrome  
and so it was; meditation. I thought of a comment Thérèse had made about our e-mails home last year from Holland: I realized the thing that appeals to me about your walk is the single-mindedness of it—not having to think about too much other than getting to today's end-of-walk.

We had started a little before ten, and we broke a little after one, I think, for a picnic lunch on the grass. Bob had made a tasty onion pissaladière — you know, a sort of focaccia with softer bread dough, all spread with sweet onions shredded fine and sweated in, what else, olive oil. This was in a big nine-by-twelve rectangular baking pan. He cut it up into little squares, and we ate them with rolls and tuna and olives and fruit, all washed down with water, and soft drinks for the kiddies — though one of our company was a winemaker, and Bob is a vineyardist, no one had thought it wise to bring a bottle of wine along.

Bob asked Don if he wanted some pissaladière, and Don said Yes, Corner piece or edge, Bob asked, Oh just give me an inner piece, Don answered, and we all thought about inner peace, and ate our lunch, and went back to work.

The afternoon lengthened. Eric and Lindsey and Emma went home; I stayed with the rest of the crew. The sun raked lower and lower. The trees seemed to be growing farther apart. The property is now pastureland for a small herd of beef cattle, Herefords mostly. Earlier they'd stood around curiously watching us, but they grew bored and left before lunch. Early in the 20th century the property had been a vineyard, to judge by the very slight traces of row planting left under the grass; it had probably been torn out when Prohibition came. Before that it had been an olive grove, and our trees were remnants of those days, a century and more ago. Some of the trees were seedlings, no doubt; that would account for the various varieties we were finding — big black ones, little black ones, small green ones, little pointed green ones.

The ones that interested us the most, Lindsey and me, were spherical green ones with a little yellow in their color, the size of a shooter marble, soft and buttery; and we'd been picking a good many of them from the one tree that offered them, on the edge of the strip of oak trees that defined a wash, a seasonal creek that was gullying down a crease at the edge of the pasture. This tree wasn't the easiest to pick: it had grown up confused with a Live Oak, and apparently with another oak that had lost its leaves.

I paid more attention to this tree at the end of the day when I took Bob up to see it. He began picking some for himself, but then decided the bare branches were poisonoak. Not only poisonoak, but "the mother of all poisonoak," a huge tangle of dangerous bare twigs and branches sticking out among all the olive branches.

I refuse to believe it's poisonoak, I told him, but of course he turned out to be right; now, four days later, it's breaking out on my arms and in the creases of my face where I'd drawn my hands across. Fortunately there were enough unknown women in the crew to arouse my natural modesty and restrain me from answering Nature's call that afternoon; there are some places poisonoak is decidedly unwelcome, and I had wisely washed up first thing on getting home.

Saturday, and Sunday morning, I smashed olives. The olives I like best are the *verts cassées*, the smashed green Provençal olives, pickled with salt and lemon peel and herbs, and that's what we're going to do with ours, I think. But first they have to be smashed. You pick up an olive with your left hand, put it on a brick, and hit it smartly with a wooden mallet. Opinions vary, but I believe the blow must be glancing, so that while striking the olive you also pull it slightly between brick and mallet, tearing it a bit. It's amazing how quickly the left hand — actually the thumb and forefinger — and the right arm and the

eye learn to coordinate themselves. An olive that's too pink, or too spotted by the sun, or a tiny bit bruised, has to go into a separate container; one that's badly bruised or spotted is rejected entirely, along with bits of lichen or leaves or twigs; the rest go into the tray the brick rests on, and now and then you sweep them all into a bucket of water, and at the end of the day you have twenty or thirty gallons of olives.

AND WHAT HAS ALL this to do with admiration, you ask. Well: I admire, deeply and profoundly, the slight rke of that pasture as it slides down toward the east away from our ridge; and that magnificent Mount St. Helena beyond, and the ineffable light of this winter sun, and the bold yet companionable grey and green and blue set off by the black trunks of these ancient ancient olive trees. I admire the feeling of community among these pickers, grandparents and parents and grandchildren, citydwellers and hicks, and the way they work together to a common cause silently and meditatively, or converse in twos or threes off in their own momentarily private trees.

It is truly extraordinary the range of experience you can have in a week, from Healdsburg to Los Angeles, from cowpasture to the Marriott, from friends family and neighbors to socialites and stars you never saw before and will never see again. From *Grande, Sabroso, y Económico* to *luxe, calme, et volupté*. I think: well, all this incredibly rich experience begins to come together now I'm moving into the late sixties; it's God's way of giving me the material for contemplation, for perhaps finally beginning to understand something, a hint of the sufficiency of experience and understanding we'll need to keep ourselves occupied in that long eternity to come. And then I think: or enough understanding to realize that this is in fact all there is, there isn't any more to come, and who would ask for it; who would have the audacity to ask for anything more?



*originally sent as e-mail  
slightly recast and corrected  
December 2001*



olives on the branch