

# The Sea Slug

## On Gut

Gut eates all day, and lechers all the night,  
So all his meate he tasteth over, twice:  
And, striving so to double his delight,  
He makes himselfe a thorough-fare of vice.  
Thus, in his belly, can he change a sin,  
Lust it comes out, that gluttony went in.

-Ben Jonson *Epigrams*

On the plane, with the perpetual morning sun being blocked by the pull down plastic blinds, Egbert the American sawed at his little lump of overchilled-butter. The plastic knife couldn't seem to puncture the fat solids. Egbert gave in and jammed the little lump of fat into the center of his bun. He squished it with his hands and chewed huge bites, letting his ears pop again and again with each chewing motion at altitude. He sat, mouth full, the Chinese buisnessman next to him sleeping quietly, childishly. The salary man's hair scrambled by old oils – his mouth open leaning towards Egbert. A comforting familiarity of all sleep. Observing him, looking over his shoulder and down, lovingly, he was to Egbert everything that he loved about China. The man made Egbert feel comfortable. The kind of comfort that comes to a man when it's backed by some sense of power and authority. The authority of a mysterious father. The father who claims authority even though it's unclear, *how*. On his first trip to China he hadn't expected to have such feelings. But things had happened to him, sitting around at his business dinners. A personal waiter in their private dining-room. Foods so delicious that seemed to appear effortlessly. He hadn't known that authority would come this easy. Especially having spent so many years on what felt like the outside. But he had grown into some stability – so it wasn't *unbelievable*; he was just surprised to be filled with these certain

other pleasures that inside had lay dormant. Their growing inside him amused Egbert, it pleased him, though he had something else in mind for China this time.

The authority was a nice side effect, a consequence of his growing appetites. Those which he had learned to indulge. He became aware of his transition in a moment (the day he decided to go back, after some thought and recollection of his especially pleasant business trip in China, it had been summer in his air conditioned LA apartment. The night before he had taken ecstasy drunkenly, he felt too old for such things. Hungover, languidly lying on his couch, the pleasant toe tapping rhythm of feeling correct in his mind, confident, something about it no longer suited him. He decided chemicals were no substitute for the real body-lyness, *gravity*, of flesh and internal processes). He could tell that some switch had flipped. In China he had found his natural authority.

He completely lost his discomfort as bashful corporate traveler. The kind who wouldn't even eat the night before a long flight so he wouldn't be forced to empty his bowels in one of those cramped vacuum toilets. Now – he reveled in his body. Lying spread eagle, face down on the big flat hard bed of the brothel, he would smile as the prostitutes put their tongues in his asshole. He didn't hold back from eating on the plane, he didn't abstain from eating before anal sex either. He found pleasure in his body as body, and he was hoping, after some work and ritual of constant sexual stimulation, he could eliminate all sentimentality, all the sentiments he had built over the years in regards to love and sex. He planned to go to the brothel as often as possible while he was back in China. He was gonna go and go until he was completely bored of it. Bored but happy, demure in his own mystical authority.

Thinking about boredom, he was wondering to himself if a person could get sexually excited by boredom, as a reflex. He pulled up his plastic blind and realized that to do so would take discipline. The plane was

descending into Beijing, and the scenery was very boring. He touched himself and looked at the warehouses all lined up like storage units, blocks stuck together to an efficient three stories. Floating over these buildings, each seemed a piece in an industrial cog. Each representing itself but also its simple variations, becoming the aggregate industrial complex of the world. The sight did not arouse him. He was ready to leave Beijing as soon as he landed and rushed quickly to catch his other plane to the country city where he could walk around and never see another white face.

The city itself was actually quite large, a city as big as Chicago, but about as culturally important as a Des Moines. He found deep existential satisfaction in this, the place was more traditionally Chinese, and so he in turn was more foreign.

His lover Shau-fung came to pick him up at the airport. His chosen English name was Jimmy, after Jimmy Stewart the actor, who he didn't look like at all. Even in spite of how he would present his profile, raise his chin and try and invite the comparison. Egbert annoyed him by calling him James and Jim, Jim-bo. Jim-bo especially destroyed him. He knew it was a name for rednecks, not someone progressive and western like himself. Jimmy got his revenge by calling Egbert *Le'ouf*, though his heart was in a better place, he wasn't watching Egbert's face scrunch in disgust. Jimmy did it to impress himself. Teasing, homosexual, and a representation of his standing, the part of him that was westernized and cultured and knew where the Louvre was. It was effective also as an affectation, since coming out of his mouth it sounded very English (one got the sense of how the English might have misinterpreted the word in the first place) *love*, or it didn't sound quite like: *love*, but a mixture of low and laugh. The name, being told, made Egbert uncomfortable in its ludicrous sensuality and affectation it was a little *too homosexual*, to be called love, to be scolded by love and reminded that love was on his lover's mind. Though saying it in public (Jimmy hardly ever said it otherwise) Jimmy never said it with a fruity

hand gesture, and this, to Egbert, was the only piece that saved him having to have an outburst. Jimmy would say it simply as if it was a common phrase in English, hardly ever even looking at Egbert. It became only two more words in a mysterious foreign language the public didn't understand. Egbert had no desire to be outed on the streets, though he wasn't really all that concerned.

Being white he felt gave him a barrier of mystery. If Jimmy needed to call him Le'ouf to be happy, he could let his discomfort slide, since he got plenty out of him. He was, among other things, a convenient chauffeur, and pleasant ground-line to the west. Over dinner they could joke with each other.

In China Egbert ate out every night and Jimmy knew what he liked. On his trip six months ago they dined out together on multiple occasions. Their connection was consecrated over western style chocolate desert with red wine and the handsy drunkenness of Egbert. Though he had had fun with Jimmy, Egbert was regretting (somewhat, not too much) becoming an item. Scared of getting too close, producing antipathy. He was hoping to secure some freedom for his new sexual spiritual demands. He figured he'd find a way, a loophole of business or whatever when they went to dine out. He'd make it up as they went along. He had an advantage, he knew what his game was. He would play this game with the help of food, over dinner.

They had been to and enjoyed multiple draped and closed door meals, but there was one restaurant that was *theirs*. He was certain that's where they would dine tonight, he could make anything sound like a clean swallow there. After some red wine and fish baked in pots with herbs and carrot in a chocolaty umami broth ... it was almost a gravy, the broth, fatty but touching the lips like a kiss, tasting of an onion; peeled stripped spun into a single long string, melted down as if dropt in a slow twirl, melting into itself, the sugars darkening, finding the ultimate pleasures of Earth, core and dirt, perhaps finished with a dust of ambergris, for a suggestion of fecality.

For desert they'd have mango slices with orange glaze.

When Jimmy picked Egbert up at the airport Jimmy looked terse, but pleased. He said hello and they shook hands like businessmen. Sitting down in the front seat of Jimmy's clean but old Peugeot, Egbert rubbed his own chest and looked over at his old lover, there was still time and distance between them. Jimmy started his car saying work had been unpleasant so he must be excused if he was not immediately in a good mood.

'I thought that's what I was here for,' Egbert said. Jimmy turned and smiled, Egbert took his hand. He didn't care how Jimmy felt, he just wanted to get on with it and take a nap. He'd touch caress, Jimmy would give into the feeling of being stroked, everyone does, no one is special when it comes to nerve endings and being an animal.

Waking up in his hotel room, the bed taking up the whole room except for a small desk which sprouted two half drunk bottles of Heineken, Egbert looked over at Jimmy who blinked his eyes, sleepy and naked. He had a beautiful penis. When it was erect it was lithe and handsome, golden. He kept his pubis shaved and when he was soft he was so small and adorable, Egbert always had to resist an urge to take the thing in his mouth like a mini marshmallow. He sincerely loved Jimmy's penis, he knew other men (and women, too) who talked about size, about girth and largeness – but they were imbeciles who didn't understand bodies, bodies removed from necessity. This is what makes them sexy. There were even men, stupid men who wanted to be larger and have more muscles, as if such things didn't just get in the way. Egbert stood at roughly six feet tall, but he had always wished to be shorter. The desire to be shorter, the desire itself, it gave him great pleasure to think it. He wasn't one of those idiots who were afraid of losing some socially conceived notion of what is attractive, those morons who lived their lives just trying to avoid loss. Loss aversion was his favorite pop-psych phrase. Filled with thoughts of his own non-conformity and weighty sexual intelligence, he would pronounce that he took what life gave

him and lived without a sense of loss aversion. Weren't humans after all just lab rats in a greater life experiment? In this mood he became humorless, and aroused. Many comedians have joked about penises thinking, overwhelming the brain, becoming sentient. But to Egbert such things were no joke. He would have welcomed living full time with the thoughts of arousal his brain penis would have directed. What an authentic way to live, to be governed by a piece of yourself that was on the border of your control.

They both got dressed. While dressing Jimmy said they were meeting a couple of his friends for dinner. Some grand post-coital inflection rose in Egbert, to question intentions, to accuse. But, he held off. Homosexuality, his advantage in being able to care less, was his weapon, and he had to use it sparingly in order to not dull it. He grunted ok to the plans that weren't his.

On the street outside the hotel they couldn't get a regular cab. It was dinner time and the hotel he preferred was outside of the central gathering area. They hopped in a covered motorcycle rickshaw, some Westerners called them boom-boom cars. Egbert reminded Jimmy of this, boom-boom cars. They were already in traffic.

Jimmy looked over at him and said, '*lofe*, I have no idea what you a talking about.'

The old woman driving the bike, her face dark and deeply un-sexual – already Egbert was unsettled by her – she started driving right into traffic. She pulled an elaborate clumsy u-turn, Egbert tried to remind himself that this was the charm of China. The traffic was heavy and she drove slowly, weaving and then grinding against the sidewalk as she sneaked past cars at stoplights. 'Why didn't we take your car?' Egbert asked Jimmy who ignored him and started talking loudly and rapidly with their driver. Words which Egbert understood only a few inflections and tone. A person really doesn't need much more than tone when it comes down to it.

In fact, when Egbert sat at dinners (on the occasions he dined with

native speakers in China) Egbert enjoyed not knowing what anyone was saying. It was soothing, reassuring. You know what you know, every word is not as significant as it would make itself seem.

They did not pull up to their regular restaurant. Egbert was pouty and jet lagged. His nap had given him visions and inspirations for the week ahead, he was ready to do auto-pilot conversation, auto-pilot consumption and indulgence. He had already pictured what he would eat and now knowing it wasn't coming to be, he felt a piece of himself snatched away. He complained to Jimmy about not wanting to meet new people. The rickshaw driver was taking off behind them like a diesel robot. Jimmy said no no, they want to meet you. What could Egbert say? Especially at this juncture, he had to submit to Jimmy's motives, he needed him. He was his sexual running-mate, to achieve what he had in mind he needed angles, options.

So they walked in and sat at their round table and ordered too much food and Egbert nodded hello hello to nine more faces and then the food was put on the lazy susan (that was English and American, the Thomas Jefferson in Egbert) it was glass and spun smoothly and they stabbed quickly at the dishes as they came around. It was a practiced sloppiness of cutting and lifting the food with the chopsticks and placing it on the small plate in front of you, though it was often easiest, once you achieved grip, a substantial tenuous hold, to go straight to the mouth. This was the part of the meal Egbert enjoyed. Eating as attention and sport. It filled his mind with thoughts of aesthetics, he drank beer gushingly and zoned out most of the conversation and regained lusty thoughts with the ingestion of the beer's yeast and scallion chicken. Though suddenly, past the point that might have come his introduction (he thought he had avoided it) he was asked to say his name. Egbert. What a name!?! A petite woman said, across the table from him. So unique! Yes, his father had been a chef. She had studied figure skating in Canada so she knew English quite well. Jimmy looked over to Egbert pleased, smiling, as a person of influence and connection. He liked influencing casually, to him that's what influence was.

Yes, Egbert said, his father loved to talk about his name. He couldn't tell it with the same enthusiasm, but it was born from an impression his father had had.

His father claimed the story this way: his name had been an impulse, a product of his father's instincts at his birth. His father was a chef, at times, prideful, and ostentatious.

As his mother evacuated Egbert and the two days previous pasta Carbanara, it was as such that his father saw his little round head (these days just balding in back, his growing God-hole he called it), and smelled such a variety of smells; the anesthetic and rubber and flesh and blood and an acidic pungence of shit, and the embryonic nature of the thing probably had something to do with it as well, his father took in this sense overload and thought; eggs. After a couple drinks he loved to go on about his thought process. *Eggs, custard, cus no not a name Gus, maybe gastronomy, Gaston, no ... eggs, poach, can't name a kid after a verb, I tell you at that moment I wanted to name you Sunny. And actually too I thought about cheese and Roquefort and man I bet you those caves smell incredible, like nothing else in the world those caves I bet. But my mind was also in Italy and the variety of sizes of bird eggs like Quail and Ostrich, but soon I was holding you and the smell was crisp, raw, like dropping an egg in a glass of beer, the smell and your eyes also, painted on and bleary, like you drank that glass. Then I was onto baking and scrambling, caviar I thought too but then everyone would have thought you were a yuppy and I was a prick. Eggs in noodles in the morning, now I could eat that everyday, then it hit me, it had to be, the obvious choice. Egbert. I had a childhood friend named that, and I knew I could sell it. The world, the kids will make fun of him your mother said and I said, the boy will actually stand for something; that things in the world that are good are good on their own terms and no one else's. This is what a chef tries to do you know, be, an egalitarian.*



After dinner, walking with Jimmy and the figure skater who had an interesting poise, *carriage* – Egbert noticed it particularly while she hailed their cab, how she stepped and waved. Upright and clunky, as if she only walked on the earth like she did after she got off the ice, with scabbards on the blades of her dainty feet. They were going to go sing karaoke. It was a Friday Egbert learned; then she got a call on her cellphone and plans changed. Their cab pulled up in front of a club. Egbert had drunk too much beer and now floated over the sidewalk, pulled into the club like a buoy over waves. They walked, the figure skater lead, letting her hand drape down the long carpeted walls. Jimmy was laughing at some nonsense and took Egbert's arm, the touch felt like handcuffs, but not in a fun way. Then the club opened up in front of them. It was designed beautifully. The lighting just right; smoky and diabolical. Onstage women in black shorts were dancing on an H shaped stage. Everyone looked at Egbert as he entered, he felt like a celebrity. The good kind, of interest, but without consequence. He broke away from Jimmy naturally and wandered in a trance, looking at all the bodies. The place was muggy and sexual, but it wasn't hot. It was the best club he had ever been in. Egbert got lost, floating around, wondering if he had taken some drug that he didn't remember. Jimmy came to grab him and led him to a table. Everyone was drinking pitchers of a concoction that tasted like sweet tea, but was alcoholic. Egbert and Jimmy cheers-ed to a variety of free plastic glasses of tea and they looked up at the stage. The music seemed to change with their attention. The girls disappeared and a lone male singer took the stage. He wore dark glasses and moved his lips as if trying to make up for the fact that his eyes were hidden. Watching him, Egbert felt like he understood why people called it Pop music. Suddenly the female dancers jumped the stage and ripped off their shorts to reveal diamond underwear. They started to throw out teddy bears to the crowd. The club burst into madness that overwhelmed the music. Egbert looked at what seemed an orgy of childish materialism. Not the good kind of orgy, which was over essentials like sex

and food, this was about stuffed bears. A look of open mouthed distaste stayed on his face. The figure skater witnessed this look, and trying to explain, contextualize, she informed them that a teddy bear from here was worth 1,000 RMB. For another moment people seemed to be climbing on each other and then it was over.

Egbert said, hmmm, and congratulated himself for not really understanding.

This is a mafia club, the figure skater said.

This caused Egbert to look around the room and he finally saw the male patrons. Lined up in booths, young, but ugly, believable in their ferocity and limitations. Egbert wondered to himself whether what a person does affects their demeanor, if what they do distorts sensuality in favor of the unambiguous. But smiles peeled over their faces as he looked at them, too long, drunkenly. He was enjoying himself, even his more serious thoughts seemed flirtatious. The mafia men looked to him preposterous and human, he kept looking back towards them, but also swaying and making eyes with a woman standing at a table who kept pouring him tea. He didn't remember how he got where he was, not just the club, but it was an existential feeling, he looked over at the mafia boys again ... did he look like what he was? Jimmy started dancing with another woman who had the smallest nose Egbert had ever seen. The two of them dancing looked hilarious. Jimmy, with his long face, her nose, or maybe it was Egbert's mood, he was happy to watch Jimmy dance, to see him but to still be distant, removed, to have a bit of celebrity to himself. To flirt without cause.

The supposed mafia guys at tables behind where Egbert was standing became emboldened and would approach and cheers Egbert. He said the word Ganbei more times than he could count and then there was hazy memories of a taxi and another bar, this one small and quiet with light jazz music and the big interested eyes of the bartender. In his drunken states, Egbert always remembered eyes.

Egbert woke up in his hotel bed, again with Jimmy. This disappointed him because he had hoped in his inebriation he would've mentioned that he wanted the next couple days to himself. Instead, he had got too drunk and succumbed, or, procrastinated his feelings. In this, the procrastination of feelings, he was annoyed. Now he would have to feel both his procrastinations and his goals simultaneously while summoning anger and distrust. Putting on the theatricality to get Jimmy to let him alone, yet to tie him down, with guilt to their intimacy. This all sounds more complicated than the words he let out. Pulling himself out of bed, walking to the bathroom, leaving the door open. The shower directly next to the western style toilet he pulled the drapery closed and examined the slotted hole in the ground. He took off his underwear and pissed down the drain. 'I've got business today,' Egbert said. Jimmy wasn't awake, he shuffled under the covers but the deed was done. Egbert started the water of the shower, pulling back from its spray he bumped and stumbled against the cold porcelain of the toilet that he could feel through the shower curtain on his calves. Hungover, he grabbed the shower head like a neck to steady himself.

Later, in the brothel, he stood in the shower stalk still, not moving his arms, his penis undulating in a clitoral like arousal as the prostitute washed him with soapy hands and sponge. She rubbed the tops of his ears and moved around to press her body up his back to run soap through his hair. He noticed she was a little too short, so he squatted and she rubbed him amused. On the bed he laid and looked at her, he had chosen poorly. He had been more attracted to the tall flat-er chested Mongolian looking girl, but had opted for the distinct femininity of this Tang era whore. She appeared as if from another century. The aristocratic features and subservience had suited him well in the shower – but together on the bed she looked childish and helpless. He thought more and more of the Mongolian looking woman. In the lineup at the beginning he had noticed himself unconsciously focusing on her, stepping past the first two women

with hardly a glance. Drawing near he could tell she was not wearing perfume. He brought his face very near to her neck, she had smelled of cheap fabric, old rucksacks fashioned into a dress. And there was something about her nose. As if it might have been placed on by a sculptor, or an armorer. The large bones under her eyes made her face a defense, this made her nose look like an aesthetic flourish, a gemstone, instead of being part of that integral structure of sense and memory. But he could have her another day. His current companion had been stroking his arms while he thought, half aroused, he would get to see them all. He looked in her eyes, young and unbroken. He flipped her over on her side, so he could focus on her lower back, he dove into motion and tradition.

At the whorehouse bar he noticed something strange. He walked out of his room, a head space vacuumed out. There was a slim and hard, handsome, man resting his elbows on his knees with a glass of red wine, and next to him a man drinking tea out of a large plastic to-go strainer mug. It was a man and his driver. Egbert ordered a scotch, the man looked at him and smiled. He had the smile of a man to whom faking intimacy came naturally. Faking intimacy, that most seductive of seductions. Egbert noticed all the details; teeth, guilt, what in America people called fear, inferiority complex, that people knew you really didn't know what you were doing. A fear so deeply hidden, when it burst from the gums everything seemed charged with meaning. A smile of war and death. Of hidden motives, of rolling with a complacent tide of bullshit. Secrets. Of fucking his wife when he was drunk, fucking his mistress after a meal, going to the brothel so he could have a drink after. A smile so fake it almost became real. Egbert liked him. He liked this idea of him. Egbert liked knowing what he was dealing with, if only it was his own ideas.

It definitely wasn't attraction. Egbert told himself that. This wasn't sexual excitement brewed by situation. The more he looked at the man the more he compared his features to those of an especially handsome

Japanese macaque. And they communicated like a different species, bonding over the most truly animal things. They couldn't speak, Egbert's Mandarin was abysmal, and the Chinese businessman had never been motivated to learn English. Yet after a third chance meeting at the brothel the man bought Egbert a drink. He also brought his fingers up to his mouth, to chew on some imaginary delicacy. And so they went to dinner. Many times.

The first, it became very clear to Egbert what this man was using him for; as a white friend. A piece of prestige Velcro. A lie. Like one morning after breakfast they went for a drive in his Mercedes, he was going to show Egbert where he was building his new complex. The warehouse and office building – Egbert had seen the pictures, all very modern, designed over video conference call by an architectural firm in Texas. He learned this from a pudgy serious subordinate who rode in the back and went to University in England. They got to this open field and exited the car. Egbert looking over tall grasses patiently as the businessman pointed at nothing.

Suddenly, down the road came a parade of mini-buses and dark vans. A group of men in dark pants and white button up t-shirts filed down bus stairs in such uniformity, that if Egbert had been high instead of full, he would've laughed. A younger white buttoned down man carried in his hands a miniature speaker and microphone. A couple others carried TV cameras. They pointed and talked looked at the field and then the cameras were rolling and suddenly the businessman had been speaking into the microphone, big grin on his face he pointed at Egbert and the cameras viewed him, with awe. And then the parade left. And back in his car the businessman was laughing. A driver had come and now he and Egbert were sitting in the back together. Confusion and pleated pants. The pudgy subordinate got in the front seat. He translated what the businessman was saying, pleased with himself, still smirking the businessman said, 'I told them you were the architect.'

Egbert did at times feel like an architect. His life was drawn up. He was its artist and executioner, being built by the funds of others. He would go back to his hotel and scribble in his journal, sit at the bar and smoke cigars. He was not yet bored of the whores. He asked the businessman, the man, for recommendations of other places. They would go and have lunch then be to the whorehouse by 4:30. They ate lavishly. So much so that more often than not the whores became a secondary motive for their outings. After a very fine meal of Thai influence, shrimp ceviche and iced cream, Egbert completely lost the will to fuck his way to enlightenment. He had already arrived. Though the businessman didn't agree, anything that wasn't Chinese food the Chinese tended to dislike. As if knowing what you were getting was more important than the end result. Such thinking wasn't uncommon around the world, and this gave Egbert another private moment of self-satisfaction. Of achieving something beyond the rest. He told himself he liked being surprised and followed willing to all the places to eat the businessman knew of – places which Egbert never could before have conceived. Private rooms on a private garden. A garden within the city, impoverished, an old new building. Doors of very utilitarian mesh and an outdoor kitchen, the star was the garden. Chamomile flowers spattered outside a screened in porch/walkway. After some beer Egbert went and peed behind a willow tree. He ate, sitting next to a dirty fan, fresh killed chicken fried in chilies. Fried scorpion. Egbert bit the body careful to keep the pointy tail in his fingers it didn't taste like much. He watched another man pop a whole scorpion into his mouth. Anything he can do I can do, Egbert thought. He ate a whole scorpion, and pricked his cheek with the stinger. They drank Baijouw. Often the next day, Egbert thought his shit smelled of gasoline.

He still saw Jimmy. After all it was comforting to be in bed with him after his daily ordeals at bodily transcendence. And dating Jimmy was better than dating women. Dating men was a respite away from the world of humiliation and obligation, the restless nerves of women.

Making dumplings with Jimmy's parents, their apartment centered around a piece of old hand carved wood chairs, connected, in English words, a sofa with armrest. Its back rest pattern was intricate, scenes of colloquial tranquility, yet Egbert failed to internalize them. He let them rest his backside as they watched a talent competition on their 46' TV. Together they ate 14 boiled dumplings at a time, a few each. Jimmy's mother and father taking turns boiling them. The dumplings were starchy, the filling unsweet, unlike the Americanized versions the dumplings were hearty like stew without tomatoes. Also they drank Baijou, 110 proof or whatever it was, and to Egbert the world became structured and dreamy. Sitting on the floor, eating, then the table, eating. He felt wobbly, but without the feeling in the top of the mouth like you were about to throw up. Egbert found himself in a very wished out washed out period. His stomach cleaned and scrubbed by a dirty sponge and careless bacterial work-woman. The eating, always eating.

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Egbert's father had written a book. It was a cooking book. Not a trailblazer, a latecomer to the party, he got excited about doing it when he saw others imbuing their texts and dishes with biography. He felt he had things to say as well about his life and work. The book was alright. At least he had ideas. Whatever those were worth, to the average housewife, absentmindedly buying presents for some brother in law who knew how to make bouillabaisse. In the book he wrote; *The thing about cooking, about constructing a dish, it's just like creating a world. The world equivalent to a serial novel. A story with many different letters and words, yet, a novel doesn't have any direct correlation to the sounds of talking and the basics of communication. It tries to do something else. Likewise, food is just food, each piece has no artistic essence in itself. What a chef tries to do is create something outside the bounds of necessity. It's why cooks can be terse and*

*mean in the kitchen, the individual words, like the individual ingredient is only a means to create beauty. Perhaps this is stupid. I admit, most chefs aren't geniuses.*

He could be condescending in his ignorance, his father.

Egbert didn't respect it. The false modesty. Egalitarianism, whatever his father believed that to mean. But he did believe in food. Pre-sexual. There was no sex without food. No indulgence without indulgence. Whatever his father had failed to understand, swallowed by his own ego, Egbert was determined to understand in his stead.

He ate everything, not with a feeling for feelings, beauty and that other nonsense, but with a feeling for understanding.

At hot-pot he ate bleached sheep intestines.

After the brothel down the block he ate a tofu, hard, like caramel.

The man, the businessman, brought him with and fed him dark fatty beef (long strands of luscious fat trailed off perfectly tender molar sized bits of muscle, tasting of caramelized garlic with some fruity notes, perhaps from clove), it was charcoal-y and seemed to have some Brazilian influence. The man went away often to Brazil where he did business deals Egbert could have heard about, could have heard what was taking place. Warehouse space and Chinese work ethic, hard work from the dark skinned laborers and room for expansion. What the man had to offer to the world of business, the world. But he didn't need to hear it. He knew it all just from the man's smile. It was all obvious after only a few beers. The businessman's smile. Drinking tea and drinking Tsingtao, eating soft shell crab, or snails (on a dinner out with the businessman and his wife, Egbert watched the wife inhale the mucousy creatures. Somehow simple and poor, yet distinguished. He found her food intake as enigmatic, even if the rest of her wasn't).

How does the mind move from situation to situation? In its attempt to fool its audience. To create continuity. A figure appears, creates something odd. Makes the situation a metaphor. The businessman did this



for Egbert, and more.

His stuffed gut lazy nerved cum empty, soul.

It was odd how often they were together, how it happened. Egbert saw him in the bath. He saw his underwear, which he noted were modern and tight unlike Jimmy's which looked outdated, with sad elastic.

It had been two months. Egbert had seen most of the whores in the two local brothels, and he did, as a matter in fact, feel bored. But he didn't feel enlightened, he felt lonely. He had grown used to the businessman's company, how together they increased each others social standing. He liked going to special dinners, where the businessman was the guest of honor. He liked his growing Chinese authority. His legitimacy as person of growing stature. With the businessman he felt like he was going places in the world. The businessman had been on a trip, Egbert was very much looking forward for him to be back in town.

Yet he wondered, how far could their friendship go? What did this businessman actually want out of him? Egbert realized he was beginning to need the businessman's company. He didn't care what the businessman wanted out of him. Egbert felt rise in him this need, the power of others, knew he needed to fight this effect. He had been wrong, thinking about authority, it was gravity and lust that he was after. That's what it had all been about from the beginning, that's where his truth was.

But truths change.

He had one more solitary visit to the brothel. A dreary rainy day with yawny women and a gross bottle of champagne. Egbert needed a better plan. The businessman was in a very busy period so to distract himself while he had time to think, Egbert found himself more with Jimmy. Jimmy enjoyed this, which peeved Egbert, that he could be so obtuse as to not understand that he was using him. On another venture to dinner with Jimmy's family, Egbert had been distracted and mopey. He observed their faces during a course of noodles; they looked at him earnestly, watching his reactions to the food. He resented their presumption that he was to become an object in

their lives. Suddenly they began speaking among each other. Jimmy in translation asked him, his parents were curious, what was his family like? It wasn't an out of place question. It was human inquiry and contextualization and the whole thing stank bitterly like rotten lettuce to Egberts suave post-modern sensibilities and what he had been doing and how he had been doing it.

But they were a kind couple, Jimmy's parents. They looked him over graciously. He told them that his father had been a chef. Egbert didn't know how Jimmy translated this but his parents clapped their hands and smiled. Jimmy translated their words by way of a dutiful child, a bit embarrassed.

'You know, they're wondering if your parents like Chinese food.'

'I don't think they know what real Chinese food is. My dad was a French chef.'

'I know that.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'I donnow ... just say yes.'

'Ok ... *whey*.'

'She-ma?' The mother said, not hearing, not getting the context.

'Yeah, they can'

'Don be a dick' Jimmy was being vulgar, intimately.

Egbert was disappointed Jimmy didn't like his semantic joke, it seemed indicative of a change. Their situation becoming too serious. Not that it had ever been frivolous, neither of them embraced frivolity well.

'What were they like your parent.'

Egbert, thinking, lost, moody and bored. Annoyed that Jimmy had forgotten to make his sentence plural. Annoyed at being understood poorly. Fine, if he wants parent give him parent.

'My father was a man who respected subtlety but didn't understand it.'

'Leuf, I can't explain that.'

'Neither can I.'

They could have used a buffer day. Instead, the next day, Jimmy and Egbert went and ate Western because Jimmy thought Egbert would like it. And he wanted to show off, knife and fork skills, palate adventurousness. Egbert at that moment found Jimmy's desires boorish. He wished Jimmy had less freedom in his work. Yet after eating, carried along by inertial consumption, Egbert agreed to wander a local museum. It was afternoon and nearly empty. The place was modern with lots of high ceilings. They looked at some old inked calligraphy under glass paneling. The emptiness of the place, the security guards following them around personally with nothing better to do. It contributed to a sense of motives. Self-suspicion. The old pottery and weaponry ached to see some combat. Like all this stillness and dis-use made them anxious.

On strips of woven bamboo planks there were words by Sun Tzu. Jimmy asked him how long, now, this time how long was he staying?

'I'm taking it sentence by sentence' Egbert said, his stride weaving. His hands behind his back.

'Why do I feel like I'm always translating you?'

'I've never asked for that.'

'It's ... the word, unfair but fair, only natural.'

They had small redemptions together.

They walked and looked at some paintings of birds and waterfalls. Finally Egbert said he had to rest. Sleep away some of this. Jimmy dropped him off at his hotel, they didn't speak. Words were too loaded. If they had lived in the world of a film, a third party viewer might wonder if they'd ever see each other again.

Egbert dozed under the sound of Chinese TV. Vaguely excited knowing he'd be having dinner with the businessman. He was looking forward to finding himself, seeing himself again through the eyes of consumption and business and use. He didn't know exactly where the restaurant was but the businessman was supposed to come pick him up at

his hotel and he did.

The ride in the Mercedes was silly comfortable. Obscure. Luxury as obfuscation – all this Egbert felt until a man with burns all over his face came up to their window to beg for money. Egbert looked into his squinty eyes, folded over by scarred inflamed flesh. The man was grotesque. The businessman laughed as they pulled away. Egbert saw his smile again, that smile. The smile of hidden guilt. Existential purification by gums and teeth. Egbert felt a nerve in his stomach fire indiscreetly.

They walked up a hidden and sudden staircase. A beautiful woman showed them their dining room. It wasn't so fancy. It didn't pretend. Yet it knew its clientele. Tea pot on a shelf away from the table. Cloth covered chairs. Tablecloth white and pure, no stains of working class labor. They sat, though not next to each other, there was a distance now of prestige and the businessman was holding table. The people sitting next to him would be engulfed, flattered. They sat, the businessman and Egbert for ten minutes, three chairs apart around a circle table. The businessman playing with his phone. They didn't speak until the chubby subordinate came in, his white shirt black tie as always and made small English talk with Egbert for a moment. They liked each other well enough and a little bit of conversation made Egbert less nervous for once. Perhaps after the day with Jimmy he had placed too many hopes on the businessman's friendship. So he focused on the small things. Sitting wasn't uncomfortable. The food was bound to be exquisite. And Egbert still had other hopes. Hopes that he would understand himself. Understand China and his consumption and his authority which appeared before him in that white papered room like a mirage. Had he needed it so? Had this want been his, or just some imprecise existential explosion? A mid-life crisis. This kind of self question was unnatural for him. There must have been some photon-ic element from some grand eruption, pricking his body, flying millions of miles through the murky frequency of deep space, rubbing all his molecules the wrong way.

They waited with the businessman and drank small cups of tea. But quickly, out of the ether, came other businessmen. Filing in, wearing dark blazers, shaking hands. One even had a punk rock aesthetic about him. He sat next to Egbert, with funk, and an idea of non-conformism. Egbert relaxed. This wasn't anything that serious. Anyway who was he that he'd be invited to a serious dinner? It became humorous that he had worried, felt at odds with things. What was there to feel at odds with?

The dinner began, like most of their dinners together, with Egbert chewing and being quiet. At first eating boiled peanuts, then some nice cinnamon toasted pumpkin seeds. But there was no drinking. Just tea on this night. Egbert might have liked a drink, but he lapsed pleasantly into the aimless realism of his mind. Then their beautiful hostess came in with the food. As the dishes were set out on the table, another man came in with a special platter. He turned his back to the table, working separately on a quasi serving station. He had a stack of small plates that he was removed one by one and placed something on with tongs. Their hostess brought one plate to each diner. On the plate was one individual sea cucumber. A sea slug. Manicured, grown more likely, with only four or five spines on its back. It sat distinguished on the little plate, placed next to their chopsticks. At first, Egbert just ignored it. Ignored it as an actual idea as *food*. He continued eating, a nice thing with tomato and egg. And he continued drinking his tea. Just like turning one's head from things one doesn't want to acknowledge, as reality, Egbert spent 15 minutes eating and not even processing that this thing was sitting there. He didn't even notice the others using fingers to guide the bottom feeder up to their lips. It was only after the businessman noticed that Egbert hadn't touched the slug, even acknowledged it, that he began to goad him. He pointed and raised his voice. He said something to the others, they smiled and pointed as well. They made motions with their chopsticks and hands to their mouths. Egbert put up a hand in protest, that he wasn't interested, and the businessman got serious. He narrowed his eyes and pointed at the slug.

'Sh-rre,' eat he said, simply. Unambiguous.

'No no,' Egbert protested. He tried saying he was full. Though it seemed that the whole table of men was now staring him down. Agitated, they glared. The businessman's subordinate tried to speak up to Egbert, he began speaking and at the same time the punk rock blazer man next to him also tried speaking in English. Their words were trying to convey something very important, but they jumbled together. Egbert noticed their eyes, which looked desperate. Finally Egbert understood the punker's words. Delicacy. How many delicacies had he eaten with the businessman? What was so important about this one? There was such earnest urgency in the room Egbert couldn't help but pinch his plate and pull it closer to his face. He examined the creature. There was nothing, no logic in his brain that told him to open his mouth and eat the thing. Even though he ate everything, there was something about the spines and mucous sheen... he was in no mood to try it. The eyes around the table watched him. Egbert could have sworn they looked scared. Was this little stupid creature really that important? Egbert dove deep. He had never backed away from a challenge. He took everything that came his way. He lived without loss aversion; what did he have to lose? He picked up his chopsticks. In his time in China he had become proficient, but beginning to pinch this globule, this surprisingly heavy specimen – he watched his chopsticks slip and slide, resisting all the pressure his hand could create. He looked up, trying to use his eyes to say, hey, at least he tried. Like a child who expects forgiveness and that; there is nothing for me to do here. No one was buying it. The businessman had been there, with the whores. Egbert couldn't pretend to be naive. Egbert focused inwardly, tried picking up his chopsticks again. His hand was shaking. He put down the chopsticks in their head rest. He wished in that moment that he too didn't need to be used, that he could lie down. Suddenly the businessman yelled at him. No one spoke, no one translated. Egbert took the slug in his fingers, compelled by fear he examined its pores. He felt the superstructure of its spine, how it didn't just flop over. The thing felt so alive, sturdy and foreign.

'At least take a bite,' said the punk rock guy on his right. Egbert's friend, he thought he was, the businessman, the one, he stared at him so seriously that if Egbert didn't know better he'd think the man's life and fortune was riding on whether or not they could get the foreigner to eat this specific dish, to accept China finally. To succumb and develop. To understand; in the world there's nothing bad. It's all here. Isn't this what he had wanted to know?

Egbert, whose face had the rouge of raw overfed chicken ... he couldn't think of what to say, where to say it and whom to say it to, just said; "I can't. I can't."

Egbert took a bus, the seats too short for his legs, then a plane and when he tried to go back to work at Hershey he realized his position wasn't as invulnerable to redundancy as he had assumed. Even the generous leeway offered by the research and development department had been strained to jealousy. His colleagues asking why they should have to show up if he didn't have to. Egbert wrote a long letter of justification claiming that he had discovered the key to understanding the Chinese market – their psychology etc. The letter was read by his boss and poorly understood. Egbert had claimed that life wasn't about flavor. It came down to pressure and: call it patriarchy call it gynocracy call it oppression call it communism call it capitalism – food was a generic kind of poison that eventually lead to death in all biological creatures. Food was inherently predation. All that mattered was the feelings associated. We liked cookies and chocolate cause they made us feel safe.

His boss briefly worried about Egbert before tidily filing the letter in a folder for performance reviews. She didn't know where else to put it – she couldn't throw it out, that would be a job for somebody in the future. The gut was resilient in that way; it metabolized and let go to the specifications it was presented. She had lived a normal and good life and knew that being in the know was a fleeting indulgence. Yes, Egbert's boss knew in her gut that his life would be hard from now on.