10-14-2015

A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity

Howard Schaap

Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work

Part of the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/842
A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity

Keywords
Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, food, Thailand

Disciplines
Sociology of Culture

Comments
Re-posted with permission from reliefjournal.com

Online access:
https://www.reliefjournal.com/relief-journal/2015/10/14/a-specially-tender-piece-of-eternity?rq=specially%20tender

This blog post is available at Digital Collections @ Dordt: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/842
October 14, 2015

The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere . . . Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her.

We remove the low table from its place in the entryway, fold out and lock its two sets of legs, and place it on the area rug in the center of the living room. The table is inlaid with a fancy-looking peacock, but the plastic white edging is now almost completely broken off, and even the glossy surface is cracked and beginning to reveal the particle-board realities underneath. We accumulate mismatched sets of silverware and plates and water, a jug of water, and a roll of paper towels for napkins.

It’s August, the doldrums. People are dying: an elderly neighbor, a man from bible study, to say nothing of world terrors. With the frenetic academic year looming, there’s no telling how our family, together for the moment, might fragment.

. . . an exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe, with a little flourish, took the cover off. The cook had spent three days over that dish. And she must take great care, Mrs. Ramsay thought, diving into the soft mass, to choose a specially tender piece for William Bankes. And she peered into the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats and its bay leaves and its wine, and thought.

The meal is a drawing together, as all meals are, an orchestration. The jaew bdak, a spicy fish paste, comes from minnows Keo salted and allowed to ferment for weeks in a pail under her table, salting and turning it until it became something powerful and lasting.

The two kinds of sausage, spicy and not, were made by a friend, given within the transaction of friendship that’s really a window between hearts allowing for the free exchange of goodnesses, tomatoes for sausages, without accounting.

The pak bone, the English name for which I can’t find even on the Internet, is a Lao vegetable we coddled through a cool spring while Keo was away, distinguishing its frail leaves from among the spurious seeds which combust spontaneously from soil.

Two types of long bean, the usual green type and a beautiful purple long bean, that someone on Facebook identifies in Chinese and Bing translates to cicada beans. These, too, are called up from the garden, as if the smell of the sky and the weight of the air made this the perfect year to grow them.

Sticky rice from Thailand in a bamboo basket.

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

The meal is a part of Keo, my mother-in-law. She’s drawn forth the frail pak bone by sheer force of will, stir-fried the dark green leaves and tougher stalks at full length so you have to wrestle with them, know their full being as you eat. She’s similarly ministered to the beans as they lengthen on their fence. Now, these are smashed in a mortar (koak) and pestle (sakk), again in a way so as to know their texture and fresh taste: the dry, earthy juice of beans among
the sweetness of cherry tomatoes, the salt of fish sauce, garlic and Thai peppers on their way from green to red.

This August meal with Keo and the one orchestrated by Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* are aesthetically and materially different, there’s no doubt, but both share a beauty rooted in care that opens onto something greater. The placement of the purples and reds on the backdrop of greens in the bean dish; that dish flanked by the light colored sausage, the dark green *pak bone*, the pale warmth of rice, the light ochre *jaew bdak*—it works upon us this August, a meal, a piece of eternity.