

# THE COMSTOCK READER



**CORE WRITING PROGRAM**  
**UNR**

# The Comstock Reader

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# Introduction

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Greetings and salutations from all of us at the Core writing Program. Just about everyone on the staff had suggestions for this reader, suggestions which we took to heart and acted on. Even with all these views, there was consensus about the basic logic of the work. We want to explain something of that logic to you. We have designed this course so that its topics move out from your immediate experience into wider circles. Over the semester, you will look into and consider issues and topics that include more and more views. But one constant should remain: your view matters and must not get lost in the crowd. We think you already know quite a lot, and you can begin to offer your views formally, now, before you graduate. In fact, we don't want you to graduate without the ability and the confidence to present your views to a thoughtful audience. English 101 guides you in the first of many steps toward that ability.

We chose the following readings—essays, fiction, poetry—to suit our plans. The three main divisions of the reader are, Identity, Authority, and Values. A final section on writings stands apart. Under the heading of Identity you'll find essays that center on the physical self. We think this sense of self as body forms a major part of identity. Some of the works center on food, some on disease, some of physical growth. There are universal experiences behind these topics, and you don't need training to be an expert on them. You know a great deal, perhaps more than you realize, about this aspect of human experience. We hope to tap into your expertise, to convince you that you indeed know enough to write and to think well about life.

The essays on authority move out from physical reality toward more abstract writings. But you are still the thinker at the center of your work. Issues about obedience, beliefs, labels, and power appear here. Answers to important questions are, alas, absent. Whether, for example, society is based on mutual trust or mass delusion we won't say. But you will have the chance to think and write about such questions. Whose view of intelligence carries weight and whose is spurious will be asked, possibly, and why some people acquire the status of experts and some the reputation as unreliable we may not know, but in this semester you can begin to focus on such questions.

The section on Values deals with beliefs about right and wrong, and with matters of social responsibility and education. Here, too, we think of you as participants in social dialogues, speakers in the national debates that never end. The question is, can you be admitted to the debates. Are your views legitimate? Do you need certification as an expert before you can say something worthwhile? We think you're ready to begin. You are already very knowledgeable in matters of educational methods and American schools. You have probably wondered about the value of marriage, and you've seen couples whose marital fate has shaped your thinking. You



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don't need to hear from the "experts," to form ideas, even though the views of others help shape your own. The underlying goal of this course is to bring you into a community, one whose members think, question, affirm, deride, laud, exclaim, warn, laugh, and write.

That last one especially. We write a lot here at the university, much more than you are accustomed to probably. Anyone can cough up an opinion and ask others to accept that. But unless you can write your views clearly, your opinions will remain private and inconsequential. If they remain unexpressed, your brightest thought will not differ from your dumbest ones; both will remain private. Insight and understanding do come with study, and writing helps preserve and clarify your thinking. Writing brings you status as a member of our community. No one can drag you into this community, although many of us get paid to help you arrive.

You have to struggle with words, those you read and those you write, and you have to work week after week, semester after semester. The writer Andy Rooney has something to say about this point.

I don't know where we all got the thought that ideas come in a blinding flash or that we can learn how to be struck with creative new ideas. Not many ideas come that way. The best ideas are the result of the same slow, selective, cognitive process that produces the sum of a column of figures. Anyone who waits to be struck with a good idea has a long wait coming. If I have a deadline for a column or a television script, I sit down at the typewriter and damn well decide to have an idea. There's nothing magical about the process, no flashing lights.

There is nothing magical about reading either. When you read the works in this book. You'll meet both familiar and new views. We recommend you read everything at least twice. Once over lightly won't do. A second reading may give you a chance to really hear, to really get at the ideas in the piece. Reading is, like writing, a skill, which means that practice will improve it and neglect will dull your ability. Most of us need practice, lots of it. It pays off over time, and if you have ever tried to learn how to ski or play guitar or ice skate, you know the value of practice. All of us in the Core Writing Program have been freshmen. All of us have felt doubts and anxieties about our abilities. We're just the sort of people you should talk to when the work seems impossible, when your writing seems to be about the worst it's ever been. So keep in touch. And don't forget; there's a writing center in Ross Hall (214) full of people trained to respond usefully to your writing. Virtually the entire university community uses it, everyone from grad students to faculty, and you are welcome to come in for help on any writing you do, in any class you take here at UNR. Visit the center and see what help they can offer you. From all of us, best wishes for success in your studies.

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# Identity

Once a Tramp, Always...  
*M.F.K. Fisher*

Of Smells and Spills, Olive Oil and Wine—The Kitchen as Joyous Workroom  
*William Corbett*

Legal Alien  
*Pat Mora*

Barbie doll  
*Marge Piercy*

My Face  
*Robert Benchley*

On Being A Cripple  
*Nancy Mairs*

Shaping Up Absurd  
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Black Men and Public Space  
*Brent Staples*

Ain't I a Woman  
*Sojourner Truth*

Haciendo Tamales  
*Cordelia Candelaria*





## Once a Tramp, Always...

M.F.K. Fisher

There is a mistaken idea, ancient but still with us, that an overdose of anything from fornication to hot chocolate will teach restraint by the very results of its abuse. A righteous and worried father, feeling broad-minded and full of manly understanding, will urge a rich cigar upon his fledgling and almost force him to be sick, to show him how to smoke properly. Another, learning that his sons have been nipping dago red, will chain them psychologically to the dinner table and drink them under it, to teach them how to handle their liquor like gentlemen. Such methods are drastic and of dubious worth, I think. People continue to smoke and to drink, and to be excessive or moderate according to their own needs. Their good manners are a matter more of innate taste than of outward training.

Craving—the actual and continued need for something—is another matter. Sometimes it lasts for one's lifetime. There is no satisfying it, except temporarily, and that can spell death or ruin. At least three people I know very well, children of alcoholic parents, were literally born drunk, and after sad experience they face the hideous fact that one more nip will destroy them. But they dream of it. Another of my friends dreams of chocolate, and is haunted by sensory fantasies of the taste and smell of chocolate, and occasionally talks of chocolate the way some people talk of their mistresses, but one Hershey bar would damn him and his liver too. (Members of A.A. pray to God daily to keep them from taking that First Drink. A first candy bar can be as dangerous.) These people choose to live, no matter how cautiously, because they know that they can never be satisfied. For them real satiety, the inner spiritual kind, is impossible. They are, although in a noble way, cheating: an honest *satyr* will risk death from exhaustion, still happily aware that there will always be more women in the world than he can possibly accommodate.

Somewhere between the extremes of putative training in self-control and unflagging discipline against wild cravings lie the sensual and voluptuous gastronomical favorites-of-a-lifetime, the nostalgic yearnings for flavors once met in early days—the smell or taste of a gooseberry pie on a summer noon at Peachblow Farm, the whiff of anise from a Marseille bar. Old or moderately young, of any sex, most of us can forgo the analyst's couch at will and call up some such flavors. It is better thus. Kept verbal, there is small danger of indigestion, and in truth, a goose-

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berry pie can be a horror (those pale beady acid fruits, the sugar never masking their mean acidity, the crust sogging . . . my father rhapsodized occasionally about the ones at Peachblow and we tried to recapture their magic for him, but it was impossible). And a glass of *pastis* at the wrong time and with the wrong people can turn into a first-class emetic, no matter how it used to make the mind and body rejoice in Provence. Most people like to talk, once steered onto the right track, about their lifetime favorites in food. It does not matter if they have only dreamed of them for the past countless decades: favorites remain, and mankind is basically a faithful bunch of fellows. If you loved Gaby Deslys or Fanny Brice, from no matter how far afar, you still can and do. And why not? There is, in this happily insatiable fantasizing, no saturation point, no moment at which the body must cry: *Help!*

Of course, the average person has not actually possessed a famous beauty, and it is there that gastronomy serves as a kind of surrogate, to ease our longings. One does not need to be a king or mogul to indulge most, if at all, of his senses with the beady enjoyment of a dish—speaking in culinary terms, that is. I myself, to come right down to it, have never been in love from afar, except perhaps for a handful of fleeting moments when a flickering shot of Wallace Reid driving over a cliff would make me feel queer. I know of women who have really mooned, and for years, over some such glamorous shadow, and it is highly possible that my own immunity is due to my sensual satisfaction, even vicarious, in such things as potato chips and Beluga caviar. This realization is cruelly matter-of-fact to anyone of romantic sensitivity, and I feel vaguely apologetic about it. At the same time, I am relieved. I am free from any regrets that Clark Marlon Barrymore has never smiled at me. I know that even though I eat potato chips perhaps once every three years, I can, whenever I wish to, tap an almost unlimited fountain of them not five hundred feet from my own door. It is not quite the same thing with caviar, of course, and I have dug into a one-pound tin of it, fresh and pearly gray, not more than eight or nine times in my life. But I know that for a while longer the Acipensers of the Black and Caspian seas will be able to carry out their fertility rites and that I may even partake again of their delectable fruits. Meanwhile, stern about potato chips on the one hand and optimistic about Beluga on the other, I can savor with my mind's palate their strange familiarity.

It is said that a few connoisseurs, such as old George Saintsbury, can recall *physically* the bouquet of certain great vintages a half century after tasting them. I am a mouse among elephants now, but I can say just as surely that this minute, in a northern California valley, I can taste-smell-hear-see and then feel between my teeth the potato chips I ate slowly one November afternoon in 1936, in the bar of the Lausanne Palace. They were uneven in both thickness and color, probably made by a new apprentice in the hotel kitchen, and almost surely they smelled faintly of either chicken or fish, for that was always the case there. They were a little too salty, to encourage me to drink. They were ineffable. I am still nourished by them. That is probably why I can be so firm about not eating my way through barrels, tunnels, mountains more of them here in the land where they hang like square cellophane fruit on wire trees in all the grocery stores, to tempt me sharply every time I pass them.

As for the caviar, I can wait. I know I cannot possibly, *ever*, eat enough of it to satisfy my hunger, my unreasonable lust, so I think back with what is almost placidity upon the times I

could attack a tub of it and take five minutes or so for every small voluptuous mouthful. Again, why not? Being carnal, such dreams are perforce sinful in some vocabularies. Other ways of thinking might call them merely foolish, or Freudian “substitutes.” That is all right; I know that I can cultivate restraint, or accept it patiently when it is thrust upon me—just as I know that I can walk right down Main Street this minute and buy almost as many Macadamia nuts as I would like to eat, and certainly enough to make me feel very sick for a time, but that I shan’t do so.

I have some of the same twinges of basic craving for those salty gnarled little nuts from Hawaii as the ones I keep ruthlessly at bay for the vulgar fried potatoes and the costly fish eggs. Just writing of my small steady passion for them makes my mouth water in a reassuringly controlled way, and I am glad there are dozens of jars of them in the local goodies shoppe, for me not to buy. I cannot remember when I first ate a Macadamia, but I was hooked from that moment. I think it was about thirty years ago. The Prince of Wales was said to have invested in a ranch in Hawaii which raised them in small quantities, so that the name stuck in my mind because *he* did, but I doubt that royal business cunning had much to do with my immediate delectation. The last time I ate one was about four months ago, in New York. I surprised my *belle-soeur* and almost embarrassed myself by letting a small moan escape me when she put a bowl of them beside my chair; they were beautiful—so lumpy, Macadamian, salty, golden! And I ate one, to save face. One. I can still sense its peculiar crispness and its complete Macadamianimity. How fortunate I am!

Many of the things we batten on in our fantasies are part of our childhoods, although none of mine has been, so far in this list. I was perhaps twenty-three when I first ate almost enough caviar—not to mention any caviar at all that I can now remember. It was one of the best, brightest days of my whole life with my parents, and lunching in the quiet back room at the Café de la Paix was only a part of the luminous whole. My mother ate fresh foie gras, sternly forbidden to her liver, but she loved the cathedral at Strasbourg enough to risk almost any kind of retribution, and this truffled slab was so plainly the best of her lifetime that we all agreed it could do her nothing but good, which it did. My father and I ate caviar, probably Sevruga, with green-black smallish beads and a superb challenge of flavor for the iced grassy vodka we used to cleanse our happy palates. We ate three portions apiece, tacitly knowing it could never happen again that anything would be quite so mysteriously perfect in both time and space. The headwaiter sensed all this, which is, of course, why he was world-known, and the portions got larger, and at our third blissful command he simply put the tin in its ice bowl upon our table. It was a regal gesture, like being tapped on the shoulder with a sword. We bowed, served ourselves exactly as he would have done, grain for grain, and had no need for any more. It was reward enough to sit in the almost empty room, chaste rococo in the slanting June sunlight, with the generous tub of pure delight between us, Mother purring there, the vodka seeping slyly through our veins, and real wood strawberries to come, to make us feel like children again and not near-gods. That was a fine introduction to what I hope is a reasonably long life of such occasional bliss.

As for potato chips, I do not remember them earlier than my twenty-first year, when I once ate stupidly and well of them in a small, stylish restaurant in Germany, where we had to wait downstairs in the tavern while our meal was being readied to eat upstairs. Beside me on a table was a bowl of exquisitely fresh and delicate chips, and when we finally sat down I could not face the heavily excellent dinner we had ordered. I was ashamed of my gluttony, for it is never commendable, even when based on ignorance. Perhaps *that* is why I am so stern today about not eating many of the devilish temptations?

There is one other thing I know I shall never get enough of—champagne. I cannot say when I drank my first prickly, delicious glass of it. I was raised in Prohibition, which meant that my father was very careful about his bootleggers, but the general adult drinking stayed around pinch-bottle Scotch as safest in those days, and I think I probably started my lifelong affair with Dom Perignon's discovery in 1929, when I first went to France. It does not matter. I would gladly ask for the same end as a poor peasant's there, who is given a glass of champagne on his deathbed to cheer him on his way.

I used to think, in my Russian-novel days, that I would cherish a lover who managed through thick and thin, snow and sleet, to have a bunch of Parma violets on my breakfast tray each morning—also rain or shine, Christmas or August, and onward into complete Neverland. Later, I shifted my dream plan—a split of cold champagne, one half hour *before* the tray! Violets, sparkling wine, and trays themselves were as nonexistent as the lover(s), of course, but once again, why not? By now, I sip a mug of vegetable broth and count myself fortunate, while my mind's nose and eyes feast on the pungency of the purple blossoms, and the champagne stings my sleepy tongue . . . and on feast days I drink a little glass of California "dry Sauterne" from the icebox . . . and it is much easier to get out of bed to go to work if there is not that silly tray there.

Mayonnaise, real mayonnaise, good mayonnaise; is something I can dream of any time, almost, and not because I ate it when I was little but because I did not. My maternal grandmother, whose Victorian neuroses dictated our family table tastes until I was about twelve, found salads generally suspect but would tolerate the occasional serving of some watery lettuce in a dish beside each plate (those crescents one still sees now and then in English and Swiss boardinghouses and the mansions of American Anglophiles). On it would be a dab or lump or blob, depending on the current cook, of what was quietly referred to as Boiled Dressing. It seemed dreadful stuff—enough to harm one's soul.

I do not have my grandmother's own recipe, although I am sure she seared it into many an illiterate mind in her kitchens, but I have found an approximation, which I feel strangely forced to give. It is from Miss Parloa's *New Cook Book*, copyrighted in Boston in 1880 by Estes and Lauriat:

Three eggs, one tablespoon each of sugar, oil and salt, a scant tablespoonful of mustard, a cupful of milk and one of vinegar. Stir oil, mustard, salt and sugar in a bowl until perfectly smooth. Add the eggs, and beat well; then add the vinegar, and finally the milk. Place the bowl in a basin of boiling water, and stir the dressing until it thickens like soft custard. . . The dressing will keep two weeks if bottled tightly and put in a cool place.

On second thought, I think Grandmother's receipt, as I am sure it was called, may have used one egg instead of three, skimmed on the sugar and oil, left out the mustard, and perhaps eliminated the milk as well. It was a kind of sour whitish gravy and. . . . Yes! Patience is its own reward; I have looked in dozens of cookbooks without finding her abysmal secret, and now I have it: she did not use eggs at all, but *flour*. That is it. Flour thickened the vinegar—no need to waste eggs and sugar. . . . Battle Creek frowned on oil, and she spent yearly periods at that health resort. . . . mustard was a heathen spice. . . . salt was cheap, and good cider vinegar came by the gallon. . . . And (here I can hear words as clearly as I can see the limp wet lettuce under its load of Boiled Dressing): "Salad is roughage and a French idea."

As proof of the strange hold childhood remembrance has on us, I think I am justified to print once, and only once, my considered analysis of the reason I must live for the rest of my life with an almost painful craving for mayonnaise made with fresh eggs and lemon juice and good olive oil:

#### Grandmother's Boiled Dressing

1 cup cider vinegar  
Enough flour to make thin paste  
Salt to taste

Mix well, boil slowly fifteen minutes or until done, and serve with wet shredded lettuce.

Unlike any other recipe I have ever given, this one has never been tested and never shall be, nor is it recommended for anything but passing thought.

Some of the foods that are of passionate interest in childhood, as potentially desirable as drink to a toper, with time lose everything but a cool intellectuality. For about three years, when I was around six, we sometimes ate hot milk toast for Sunday night supper, but made with rich cocoa, and I would start waiting for the next time as soon as I had swallowed the last crumbly buttery brown spoonful of it. I am thankful I need have no real fear of ever being faced with another bowl of the stuff, but equally happy that I can still understand how its warmth and savor satisfied my senses then. I feel much the same grateful relief when I conjure, no matter how seldom, the four or five years when I was in boarding schools and existed—sensually, at least—from one private slow orgy to the next, of saltines and Hershey bars, bite for bite.

There is one concoction, or whatever it should be called, that I was never allowed to eat, and that I dreamed of almost viciously for perhaps seventeen years, until I was about twenty-two and married. I made it then and ate every bit of it and enjoyed it enormously and have never tasted it since, except in the happy reaches of my gastronomical mind. And not long ago, when I found a distinctly literary reference to it, I beamed and glowed. I love the reality of Mark Twain almost as much as I love the dream image of this dish, and when he included it, just as I myself would have, in a list of American foods he planned to eat—"a modest, private affair," all to himself—I could hardly believe the miraculous coincidence: my ambrosia, my god's!

In *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain grouses about the food he found in Europe in 1878 (even a god can sound a little limited at times) and makes a list of the foods he has missed the most and most poignantly awaits on his return. It starts out "Radishes," which is indeed either blind or chau-



vinistic, since I myself always seem to eat five times as many of them when I am a tramp abroad as when I am home. He then names eighty separate dishes and ends, "All sorts of American pastry. Fresh American Fruits. . . . Ice water." Love is *not* blind, and I do feel sorry about a certain lack of divinity in this utterance, but my faith and loyalty are forever strengthened by items 57 and 58: "Mashed Potatoes. Catsup."

These two things were printed on the same line, and I feel—in fact, I know—that he meant "Mashed Potatoes and Catsup," or perhaps "Mashed Potatoes with Catsup." This certainty springs from the fact that there is, in my own mind and plainly in his, an affinity there. The two belong together. I have known this since I was about five, or perhaps even younger. I have proved it—only once, but very thoroughly. I am willing to try to again, preferably in "a modest, private affair, all to myself," but in public if I should ever be challenged.

We often ate mashed potatoes at home. Grandmother liked what my mother secretly scoffed at as "slip-and-go-easies": custards, junkets, strained stewed tomatoes, things like that, with mashed potatoes, of course, at the head of the list as a necessity alongside any decent cut of meat. But—and here is the secret, perhaps, of my lifelong craving, we were never allowed to taste catsup. Never. It was spicy and bad for us, and "common" in bottles. (This is an odd fact, chronologically, for all the housekeepers of my beldam's vintage prided themselves on their special receipts for "ketchups," made of everything from oysters to walnuts and including the plentiful love apple.)

I remember that once when Grandmother was gone off to a religious convention, Mother asked each of us what we would most like to eat before the awesome Nervous Stomach took over our menus again. My father immediately said he would pick a large salad of watercress from the Rio Hondo and make a dressing of olive oil and wine vinegar—a double cock-snoot, since olive oil was an exotic smelly stuff kept only to rub on the navels of the new babies that seemed to arrive fairly often, and watercress grew along the banks of a stream that might well be . . . er . . . *used* by cows. When my turn came, I said, "Mashed potatoes and catsup." I forget exactly what went on next, except that Father was for letting me eat all I wanted of the crazy mixture and I never did get to. Ah, well . . . I loved watercress, too, and whatever forbidden fruits we bit into during that and similar gastric respites, and I did not need to stop dreaming.

My one deliberate challenge to myself was delicious. I was alone, which seems to be indicated for many such sensual rites. The potatoes were light, whipped to a firm cloud with rich hot milk, faintly yellow from ample butter. I put them in a big warmed bowl, made a dent about the size of a respectable coffee cup, and filled it to the brim with catsup from a large, full, *vulgar* bottle that stood beside my table mat where a wineglass would be at an ordinary, commonplace, everyday banquet. Mine was, as I have said, delicious. I would, as I have also said, gladly do it again if I were dared to. But I prefer to nourish myself with the knowledge that it is not impossible (potato chips), not too improbable (fresh Beluga caviar). And now I am sharing it with a friend. I could not manage to serve forth to Mark Twain the "Sheep-head and croakers, from New Orleans," or the "Prairie hens, from Illinois," that he dreamed of in European boarding-houses ninety years ago, but mashed potatoes *with* catsup are ready to hand when he says the word.

## Of Smells and Spills, Olive Oil and Wine— The Kitchen as Joyous Workroom

*William Corbett*

I first saw shelves of cookbooks, hanging copper pots, an over-flowing spice rack—first drank wine and first ate garlic, olive oil, kosher salt, and soups made with homemade stock—in Carol Braider's kitchen. I was 15 at the time and because of my upbringing expected kitchens to be as sterile as hospital rooms. You went into them carefully for snacks, made no mess, and at dinner you cleaned your plate, did the dishes, and did not linger. It was a high compliment to declare that some housewife's kitchen floor was clean enough you could eat off it.

Carol Braider's kitchen smelled of food and cooking; there was no attempt to hide what took place there. Her stove was crusted with spilled food and her refrigerator crammed with leftovers—it was what my grandmother called a pigsty. As she cooked, Carol drank wine, and dishes were as much improvised as built from recipes. Her aprons were spotted and stained, and she was constantly hovering, tasting, stirring, adding pinches of this and that.

When you dined at Carol's table you were expected to smoke between courses, to drink a few glasses of wine, to talk over coffee. Carol's husband, Donald, was my teacher, and when I came into their house as a baby-sitter and had my first meal there, I was appalled and fascinated. We ate spaghetti with a sauce that was *not* meatballs, and their poodle, Bucky, ate with us—I can still see the strands of pasta disappearing one after another into his curly black muzzle. Growing up, I was usually put off by the strange odors in friends' kitchens. But Carol's kitchen did not repulse me. There was so much life and so many mysteries in the place that I was drawn to it.

My awareness of food as more than sustenance, of the lore of cooking, eating, and drinking, began in the Braider kitchen. Carol's kitchen meant freedom to me; although I was fed liberally at home, like any middle-class child of the '50s, I was confined to a dull menu and a tense dinner hour.

My mother must have felt similar constraints, for as she got to know Carol she began to consult French cookbooks, use wine in sauces, and generally let her kitchen and her cooking go. She had always loved to eat and had a lumberjack's appetite—she was forever going on a diet tomorrow. Yet before Carol's influence my mother's cooking was as bland as her kitchen was spotless, and her dinners had as much to do with discipline as with food.

"To Carol Braider's Kitchen" by William Corbett from *Antaeus*, Spring 1992, NOT FOR BREAD ALONE, edited by Daniel Halpern. Copyright 1992 by Antaeus. Reprinted by permission.

My father was a doctor, a general practitioner, and five nights a week he held office hours, first in a room off the kitchen and then at his office in a local shopping center. When he came home at sundown he wanted food on the table. If my mother served us a dish fixed—she never “prepared” a meal—in a new way, he ate it without comment in ostentatious silence. In response to her asking if he liked it, he’d snap, “I’m eating it, ain’t I?” He half meant this to be funny, but he had so little gift for humor that the effect was most often deadening.

During the day my mother used the rod of my father’s coming home to dinner to try to keep us in line. When he arrived, my mother served up our crimes with the casserole, and the meal quickly became a court in which we were lectured and punished—so many nights early to bed, so many afternoons doing yard work. As he harangued us, we either wolfed our hamburgers, hot dogs, or tuna casserole so as not to be hectored about our lack of appetite or, baleful night, pushed our food around our plates, food we had to force down even on an ordinary night: liver, broccoli, lima beans. Frozen Ford Hook lima beans cooked in a pressure cooker resembling the kaiser’s helmet! Limas that were a stomach-turning green, mealy *and* slimy, and even drowned in catsup...impossible to force down. My brother and I could not be members of the clean plate club no matter the threats that rained down on us: “You’ll stay here and finish your dinner even if it takes until hell freezes over.” It’s no wonder I still inhale my food, as if to escape the table.

Just as mealtime was a penance, cooking, for the cooks of my childhood, and eating, for all of us, were forms of labor. Throughout my childhood I heard women complain of slaving over a hot stove, of working their fingers to the bone fixing dinner, and of men who wouldn’t lift a finger. Given the extraordinary plenty of this country, it seems strange that we didn’t enjoy ourselves more, but we didn’t seem to know how.

In Carol Braider’s kitchen I experienced a mixture of leisure and total attention. Every move Carol made mattered and could be enjoyed in itself; every cheese, cut of meat, sauce, piece of fruit, and hunk of bread had a history, imparted some knowledge, and therefore possessed a presence. I remember watching once as Carol made cassoulet with its traditional goose fat, mutton, and pigs’ hocks. It was a snowy March afternoon, and she cooked from a thick book warped by butter, oil, and a hundred different sauces.

Certainly there was turmoil—and sometimes sharp words—as Carol cooked, but there was also the intense pleasure of watching someone in love with her work, and the special pleasure of listening and talking while you are doing something else at the same time. Carol seemed to be free to do as she pleased, and this sense of freedom was liberating for me. Carol made food that tasted good, sometimes great—but the greater pleasure came from enjoying food for its own sake. In this way the humblest sausage or a dish of leftover cassoulet has dignity. And so does the man or woman who sits down to savor it.